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American Themes

Joseph Epstein on George Washington
Susan Balée on American Autobiographies
Harold Fromm on Wilderness and Technology
Dana Gioia on Learning from Robert Fitzgerald
William H. Pritchard on Raymond Chandler
Thomas M. Disch on Postmodern Fiction
Mark Jarman on Wallace Stevens
Karen Wilkin on David Smith

Poems by Hayden Carruth, Dana Gioia, Emily Grosholz, John Haines, Anthony Hecht, Mark Jarman, Maxine Kumin, Robert McDowell, David Mason, Louis Simpson, Charles Tomlinson

Story by Gary Krist **Memoir by** Jocelyn Bartkevicius

Articles and Reviews by Bruce Bawer, Bert Cardullo, Robert S. Clark, Josiah Fisk, Dean Flower, R.S. Gwynn, Richard Hornby, John Loughery, David Mason, Marcia B. Siegel

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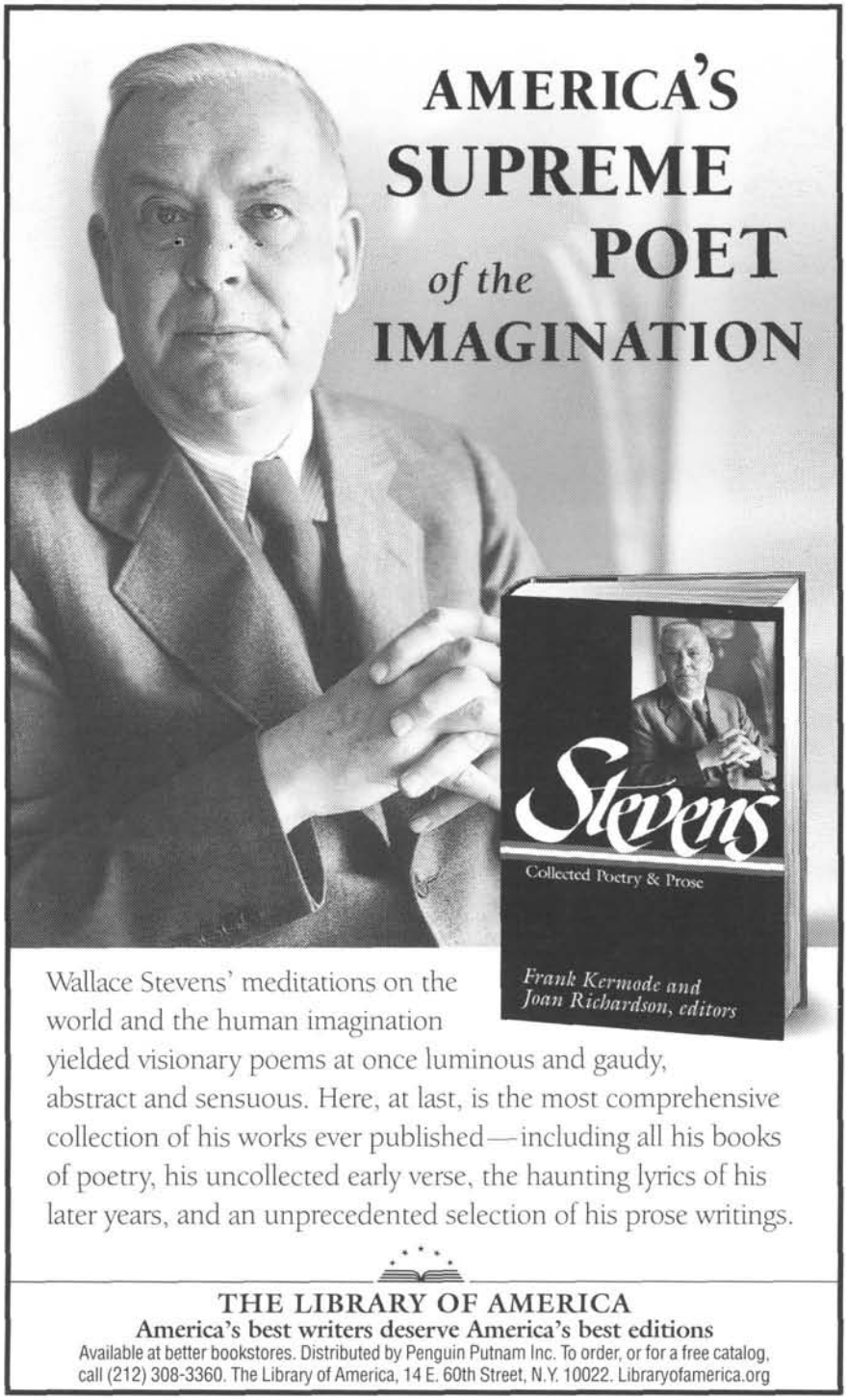

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TO OUR READERS

Volume I, Number 1 of THE HUDSON REVIEW appeared in the spring of 1948. Effective with the publication of this, its 201st issue, Frederick Morgan retires after fifty years as Editor. He will continue to serve the magazine in an advisory capacity.

In the absence of support this year from the National Endowment for the Arts, publication of this 50th Anniversary Issue of THE HUDSON REVIEW has been made possible by major gifts from Dr. Julius H. and Joan L. Jacobson, Marianne Musalo-Kown and Lawrence W. Kown, Dr. John N. Loomis, George Parker, Jr., Beth Straus, the Arthur F. and Alice E. Adams Charitable Foundation, and the Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation. We wish to express our warmest appreciation to these generous donors.

For additional support, we are also grateful for public funds provided by the New York State Council on the Arts, a State Agency.

A new book by an Advisory Editor of THE HUDSON REVIEW has recently been published. In accordance with our policy, it will not be reviewed in these pages, but is listed below for the interest of our readers:

GARY KRIST: *Bad Chemistry*, a novel. Random House. $24.00.

Coming in the Summer issue—

The Early Years of The Hudson Review:

An Interview with Frederick Morgan

by Michael Peich

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Letter to the Editors

Dear Editors:

In your Winter 1998 issue, Thomas M. Disch comments on the future of publishing, asserting that the Web and computer technology will produce a new reading world of books downloaded from Internet sites and mostly self-published. "Once the technology of the reading machine has been perfected the printed book will go the way of incunabula, the 78-rpm record, and Beta tapes," he writes. If Mr. Disch took the reader's viewpoint, however, he'd change his tune. The threat to the printed book by the Net is a misperception.

The World Wide Web and the rest of the Internet work as resource and entertainment centers. Consumers want to log on to find breaking news, job listings, weather maps, sports scores, book/movie/TV/music reviews, and data in general. Other than that, the Web is a fun place to play games and chat real-time, but it's not the place to indulge in a good book. Buy a book, yes, but read something as intricate as Martin Amis' *London Fields* or even as light as Robert Waller's *The Bridges of Madison County*? Hardly. Even downloading and printing a classic text from the Project Gutenberg site may seem clever and affordable to students, but the reading experience involves carrying around 200 to 300 cumbersome 8½″ × 11″ pages that are too bulky to staple altogether. Individual chapters could be stapled, but then they'd end up scattered around the house, car, dormitory, classroom, or wherever. How do you flip back to Chapter 2 from Chapter 10 when Chapter 2 is on the kitchen table and you're on the subway? Which is to say, there's a science to making a book, and it's done not only with an eye toward art but the pleasant experience of readers.

To that end, what's lacking in online books is the meditative state of the reader that Sven Birkerts describes in *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*, published in 1994 by Faber & Faber. "I value the state a book puts me in more than I value the specific contents," he writes. Indeed, the experience of touching the printed pages, reflecting on the author's biography and the promotional blurbs, admiring the jacket illustration and the size and feel of the book cannot be imitated online or off a laser printer. Nor can the aesthetics of taking sixty minutes out of an insane life and sitting beside a fire with a good book and a Scotch.

Even if a hand-held computer with a screen that folds like a book and mimics the size of a 5″ × 7″ Algonquin novel is created, it still will lack the power of the printed book. Sure, it will be convenient, but it will be mechanical. Readers will have to boot up, log on, and download. And if the book is already downloaded into the machine's memory, then it's a

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Princeton University Press published Robert Pinsky's first books and we are pleased that they remain available in bookstores throughout the country.

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In March 1995, at the Association of American Publishers annual conference, Edward A. Morrow, a past president of the association and bookstore owner, claimed multimedia and electronic books would conquer the publishing industry. "For every reader who dies today, a viewer is born," he said, as reported by the *New York Times*. I disagree. Something like that is only going to happen if parents and teachers train next generations to view and not read, which, in my opinion, is the real threat.

Publishers and booksellers need to continue to embrace and capitalize on the fact that readers want to browse and buy and hold and keep and give books. And then they need to look at the Web as a marketing opportunity, where readers can read chapter excerpts, listen to an author interview, read advance reviews, get recommendations, and order a book to be delivered to the household doorstep. That's the wave of the future. And there's no need to worry about writings of the untalented self-published overwhelming the market on the Web either, as Disch implies. Bad books don't get bought and they won't get read online either. People just don't have that kind of time.

The technology of the reading machine definitely will be perfected, as Disch remarks, and it will be touted as the next best thing, but it eventually will become just another way to experience a book, just like audio or CD ROM literature. The printed book will remain the cash cow and the true friend. And not because it's what we're used to, but because it fills our senses.

Columbus, Ohio

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Playing to the Camera

Film Actors Discuss Their Craft

Edited by Bert Cardullo, Harry Geduld, Ronald Gottesman, and Leigh Woods
Foreword by Stanley Kauffmann

In this lively anthology, leading film actors from the silent era to the present—Charlie Chaplin, Greta Garbo, Marcello Mastroianni, Henry Fonda, Meryl Streep, and many others—describe the art and technique of acting for film. Illustrated with over fifty movie stills, the book provides a fascinating mix of shoptalk, anecdotal history, personal reminiscence, philosophy, and practical acting advice from a stellar cast of favorite screen performers.

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Thomas M. Disch replies:

In the matter of prophecies, wishes, dreads, and shrugs are all on a par until time has told. Kassie Rose would seem to be both temperamentally and professionally disposed to be sanguine concerning the future of book publishing, but I don't think my darker prospect for the book's survival will be a bad thing over all. If the book does become an *objet d'art,* the Sven Birkerts of the world can go on touching pages with their wonted delight, as equestrians could still go riding after Ford introduced the Model T.

The unpredictable difference is how the act of reading will change as the Word is dematerialized. After Ford more beggars did ride, and rode for longer distances. After the PC, functional literacy and basic computer skills will become ever more essential urban survival skills. More and more data will flow through our intakes in print form but less and less often in book-sized units. That's a simple straight-line extrapolation of current trends.

As to the issue of quality control, my sense of the matter is that bad books do get bought, as bad money drives out good. The problem for a bookless future is to find a system by which the happy few can find their way to what will keep them happy. The culture-wide star system has already broken down in "art" literature. There are at least twenty incompatible schools of poetry these days, each happily oblivious of its rivals. The national machineries of reputation-making are so little concerned in these matters that poetry has been left to its own devices. Short fiction has reached nearly the same anarchic ideal, and the non-commercial novel in its many varieties ditto. The problem is not with the "untalented self-published" overwhelming us with their bad books, but rather the multitudes of the reasonably capable jamming the culture's P.O. box with a worthy profusion. Rita Dove has had her season as our laureate, but, without dismissing her claims, there must be five hundred poets no less deserving, or twice, or ten times that many. In a field of spring flowers, do we *need* to find just one deserving of a Pulitzer? Perhaps, as with God, if there were no Pulitzer Prize we would have to invent one.

Is this a pessimistic view? Not for a vast majority of the lilies of the field.

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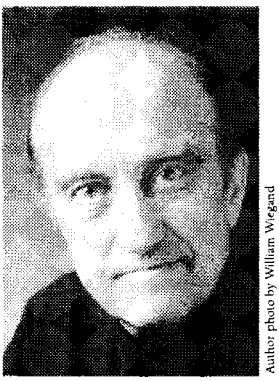
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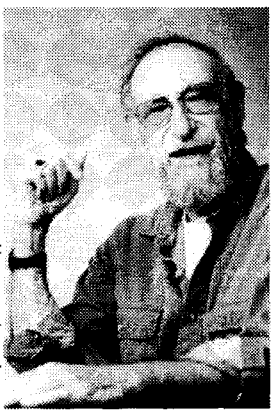
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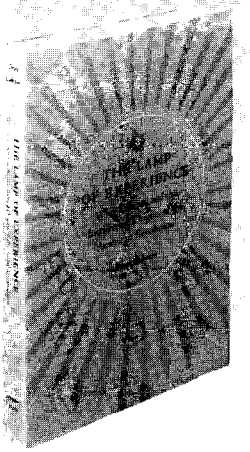

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Trevor Colbourn is President Emeritus of the University of Central Florida.

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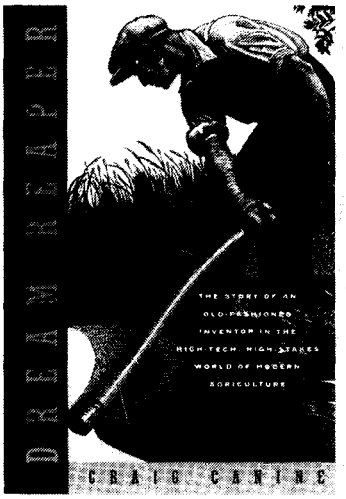

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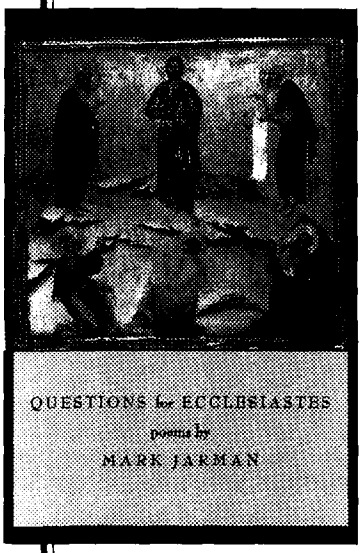

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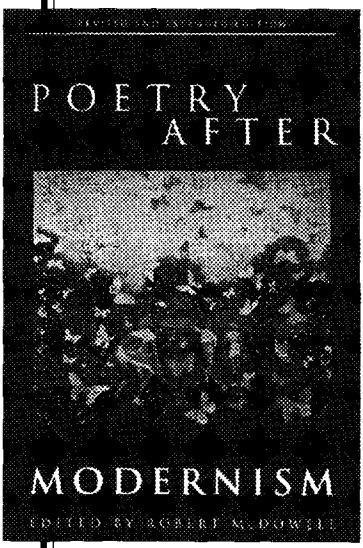

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JOSEPH EPSTEIN

George Washington, An Amateur's View

In *The American Commonwealth*, his book of 1888, Lord Bryce, considering American political institutions, provides an early chapter titled "Why Great Men Are Not Chosen Presidents." Most Americans, without needing to hear the argument, are likely to agree with the chapter's premises. The *planetarkhis*, the modern Greek word for ruler of the planet, the President of the United States may well be, but we can all be assured that, whoever he is, nowadays he is almost certainly likely to be a mediocrity. "Besides," Bryce wrote, "the ordinary American voter does not object to mediocrity. He has a lower conception of the qualities requisite to make a statesman than those who direct public opinion in Europe have. He likes his candidate to be sensible, vigorous, and, above all, what he calls 'magnetic,' and does not value, because he sees no need for, originality or profundity, a fine culture or a wide knowledge." Mr. Ford, Mr. Carter, Mr. Reagan, Mr. Bush, Mr. Clinton—take a bow, please.

Bryce goes on to discuss the other factors inhibiting, if not absolutely excluding, the possibility of a great man becoming President of the United States: the preference for a safe over a brilliant man, the nature of American party politics, the distinct difference between a successful candidate and a successful leader, the humdrum and ceremonial nature of much of the job. "We may now answer the question from which we started," Bryce writes. "Great men have not often been chosen presidents, first because great men are rare in politics; secondly, because the method of choice does not bring them to the top; thirdly, because they are not, in quiet times, absolutely needed."

Happy with our mediocrity though we Americans may be, it is also more than a mite interesting to note that Lord Bryce felt that the presidency of the United States was nearly designed with George Washington in mind. "The creation of the office," Bryce

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averred, "would seem [to the members of the Second Continental Convention meeting in Philadelphia in 1783] justified by the existence of a person exactly fitted to fill it, one whose established influence and ripe judgment would repair the faults then supposed to be characteristic of democracy, its impulsiveness, its want of respect for authority, its incapacity for pursuing a consistent line of action." Washington, in this description, was not only the perfect man for the job, but the man after whom the job itself ought to be tailored.

Remarkable though George Washington was in so many ways, the ways of remarking upon both him and his extraordinary qualities are not easy. People have tried, for more than two centuries now, and with vastly uneven results. Was he an authentically great man, or instead merely the right man for his time? Was he a great military leader, or instead, General Kutuzov-like, a man whose genius lay in his sensing when not to fight? Had he a vision for his country, or for that matter anything resembling a coherent political philosophy? Was he, in the judgment rendered him by history, a fluke, a very lucky man, or was the newly-fledged United States lucky beyond its wildest reckoning in having a man of George Washington's caliber to call upon in the crucial years of its revolution and the forming of its unique republican democracy?

I hope no one thinks that I pose these questions with confident answers already in mind, for seeing Washington plain is a project at which even the best minds, of his time and ours, have strained themselves to do. Consider one of the subtlest of those minds, that of Thomas Jefferson, who served as his Secretary of State. In a letter of 1814—written nearly fifteen years after Washington's death—to a Dr. Walter Jones, who was then preparing a history of the young republic, Jefferson claimed to know Washington "intimately and thoroughly," and provided the following delineation of his character.

Jefferson did not award Washington universally high grades. He thought Washington's mind was "great and powerful, without being of the very first order." It was a mind "slow in operation, being little aided by invention or imagination, but sure in conclusion." Although Washington planned his battles "judiciously," he was "slow in readjustment" when things did not go according to plan. He was, Jefferson thought, fearless though

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"most tremendous in his wrath," with his integrity "most pure, his justice the most inflexible." He was "in every sense of the word, a wise, a good, and a great man," yet "his heart was not warm in its affections" and "he exactly calculated every man's value," which suggests an ungenerous utilitarianism.

As an intellectual and as a visionary, Jefferson recognized in Washington nothing of the soul mate, and of course the two men would later find themselves in different political parties. Jefferson continues: "His time was employed in action chiefly, reading little and that only in agriculture and English history." He had little sympathy for "visionary projects." What is more: "He was naturally distrustful of men, and inclined to gloomy apprehensions," such that "I do believe that General Washington had not a firm confidence in the durability of our government," which is what caused Jefferson to believe Washington thought that the United States must one day end up with the ceremoniousness of the British constitution. What Jefferson couldn't have known was that part of the reason Washington was so highly revered was that he was thought to have gotten the best out of, without ever having been dominated by, intellectuals such as Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton.

"A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma," Churchill's fine formulation for the complexity of the old Soviet Union applies nicely to Washington, except you might take the entire package—riddle, mystery, enigma—and double wrap it inside a conundrum. Less talented than other generals, less intelligent than other politicians, not at all well educated to begin with, parochial in both his background and interests, a man with a strong sense of *amour-propre* but no complex vision, either political, religious, or economic, here was this man, George Washington without whom, everyone who has thought at all about it agrees, the experiment in government known as the United States would, as like as not, almost certainly have failed. Consider the historian Forrest McDonald, who, in the preface to his book on *The Presidency of George Washington*, of Washington writes:

> He was indispensable to the American experiment in self-government. And yet, as his actions and the quality of his leadership as president are appraised in the following pages, the reader may wonder just what made Washington himself so special. Among others,

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> his chief justice [John Marshall], two of his cabinet ministers [Jefferson and Hamilton] and his most trusted adviser in the House of Representatives [James Madison] will appear to have been at least as able as he was—and considerably more important in formulating the programs and policies that insured the perdurance of the federal government.

McDonald goes on to suggest that the mystery of George Washington—he calls it a "dual mystery"—may not ultimately be solvable, the man's career itself having partaken of myth, "for George Washington, in his own lifetime, was self-consciously both more than a mere man and less than a man: his people craved a myth and a symbol, and he devoted his life to fulfilling that need." Perhaps so; but then, again, perhaps not.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen never describes Elizabeth Bennett, which allows girls and young women, when reading the novel, to believe Elizabeth looks like them. Does something similar pertain to George Washington? Do we read into him those traits we either think we have ourselves or wish we did have? "I glory in the character of Washington," John Adams, a not uncritical connoisseur of things Washingtonian—he once referred to Washington as a "muttonhead"—wrote to a friend, "because I know him to be an exemplification of the American character." The words are simple enough, but what, precisely, do they mean?

What makes an understanding of George Washington complicated is that this riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma and then double wrapped inside a conundrum has also been tied with bows of celebration as gaudy as any historical package in the history of history. Washington was famous even before he was great, monumental while still drawing breath, apotheosized while still very much alive. Vast numbers of cities, a state, human beings, and finally of course the nation's capital were named after him. He was under nearly full-time request from portrait painters and sculptors. The heavy myth begins with Parson Mason Locke Weems's biography, published when Washington was still alive and perhaps able—who knows?—to squirm under its smarmy anecdotage.

Shorn of its Weemsian moral exempla—"Father, I cannot tell a lie, it was I who chopped down the cherry tree"—George Washington's boyhood was fairly typical of the second-line Virginia

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gentry of which his family was a part. The family would probably have remained part of this lesser squirearchy had not Washington's father Augustine died suddenly, in 1743, when George was eleven. George was the first of his father's five children from a second marriage (Augustine had had four children from his first marriage). George was left sufficient land and personal effects to give him a start but not a secure niche in life. He would have to make his own way.

The young George Washington at first thought the way was to be made with the help of his eldest half-brother Lawrence. His father's major legatee, Lawrence Washington had been educated in England, and was intelligent, polished, and winning enough to marry above himself into the Fairfaxes, one of the first families of Virginia. George idolized his brother, who seems to have repaid this admiration with a steady flow of fine feeling between a man in his mid-twenties and a half-brother fourteen years his junior.

Lawrence thought a naval career might be the answer for George, but the boy's mother, a strong-minded woman, known neither for her wide sympathy nor generous impulses, quickly put the kabosh on that. Washington's education, about which not much is known, apparently did not go much beyond the standard rudimentary subjects. (His father's early death precluded his studying, as the sons of Augustine Washington's first marriage did, in England.) He learned no foreign languages, a source of mild shame later in life. (He never visited France because, he said, he was embarrassed about requiring a translator there.) His religious training, as his biographer Douglas Southall Freeman writes, "was of a sort to turn his mind to conduct rather than creed." At fifteen he became a surveyor. Although no one ever accused Washington of being dreamy, such dreams as he had were chiefly commercial; he saw the way to wealth in the acquisition of land, which he began to acquire on his own from the age of eighteen—and continued to do throughout that portion of his life not spent either as a soldier or a political leader.

At nineteen, George accompanied his brother Lawrence to the Barbados—the only time he would ever travel outside America—where the latter went seeking a cure for weakened lungs, which he was not to find. While there, George contracted the smallpox that was to leave him pockmarked for life but also immune to that eighteenth-century killer. Lawrence himself died the following

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year, 1752, leaving George, not yet twenty-one but a self-starter, in charge of large portions of his estate.

Washington was becoming less a handsome than a striking, a prepossessing young man, who combined the skills of the frontier with those of the drawing room. He would grow to six foot three and weigh two-hundred pounds; he was said to be among the best horsemen of his age. He could withstand hardship but was not averse to good food, clever talk, well-made clothes. He had become a Mason, had substantial land holdings, and by the age of twenty-one was appointed a major in the Virginia militia and given a regiment to command in the wars against the French and Indians. Not at all bad for a man with less than first-rate connections in what seemed to many the closed society of Virginia.

The element of presence comes into play, perhaps heavily into play, with George Washington. He seemed to impress all with whom he came into contact. The impression Washington seemed to make on everyone was that of an attractive gravity. The initial impression of Abigail Adams, no pushover, who first met Washington in 1775, when he had been named commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, is close to the standard one. "You had prepared me to entertain a favorable opinion of him," she wrote to her husband John, "but I thought the half was not told me. Dignity with ease and complacency, the gentleman and the soldier look agreeably blended in him. Modesty marks every line and feature of his face."

If Washington was an unusually unimaginative man, he enjoyed the advantages of not having a strong imagination. Chief among them is that it allows one to take the world as it is, not to argue with it, not wish to change it unless its conditions become intolerable. This George Washington always seems to have done. If one takes the world as it is, it becomes a lot easier to know what to ask of it.

Consider Washington's marriage. One story has the young George in love with Sally Cary Fairfax: "The exact nature of their relationship cannot be defined," writes James Thomas Flexner. Since Sally was married, George sought elsewhere, and came up with a wealthy widow, Martha Custis, who had two children (and lost two others in their infancy) from her first marriage. Southall Freeman puts the twenty-six-year-old Washington's courtship

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neatly: "The young widow, five-foot tall and pudgy, was among the wealthiest and most desirable in Virginia when the tall young Col. George Washington bowed low to her on March 16, 1758. Washington did not stay then more than a day or a day and a half [at her house], but as he looked at the lovely Martha and across the broad, rich fields of level land, he resolved to come again." And he did, quite possibly closing the deal, Southall Freeman suggests, on his second visit. "Neither partner," the historian Richard Norton Smith writes of the marriage, "entertained illusions."

Washington would later affirm that his marriage was the one event in his life "most conducive to happiness." Yet when his stepdaughter—and the Father of his Country, alas had no children of his own—was considering marriage, Washington advised her to lower her expectations, and not to "look for perfect felicity before you consent to wed. Nor conceive, from the fine tales the poets and lovers of old have told us of the transports of mutual love, that heaven has taken its abode on earth. Nor do not deceive yourself in supposing that the only means by which these are to be obtained is to drink deep of the cup and revel in an ocean of love. Love is a mighty pretty thing, but, like all other delicious things, it is cloying; and when the first transports of the passion begin to subside, which it assuredly will do, and yield, oftentimes too late, to more sober reflections, it serves to evidence that love is too dainty a food to live on *alone*, and ought not to be considered further than as a necessary ingredient for that matrimonial happiness which results from a combination of causes: none of which are of greater importance than that the object on whom it is placed should possess good sense, a good disposition, and the means of supporting you in the way you have been brought up. . . . Be assured, and experience will convince you that there is no truth more certain than that all our enjoyments fall short of our expectations, and to none does it apply with more force than to the gratification of the passions."

This solid, if somewhat world-weary advice would seem to speak less to a marriage of endless felicity than to one built on the stronger friendship that resignation to limitations makes possible. George Washington was of the school of hard knocks. Time and again, as both a military commander and as a political leader, he insists it is a grievous error to discount the heavy role that

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self-interest plays in the affairs of all men. In 1778 he wrote about the need to have his troops properly paid: "Men may speculate as they will; they may talk of patriotism; they may draw examples from ancient story, of great achievements performed by its influence; but whoever build upon it, as a sufficient Basis for conducting a long and bloody War, will find themselves deceived in the end. . . . For a time it may, of itself, push Men to Action; to bear much, to encounter difficulties; but it will not endure unassisted by Interest."[1] And again, this time to the president of the Congress: "When men are irritated, and the Passions inflamed, they fly hastely to Arms; but after the first emotions are over, to expect, among such People, as compose the bulk of an Army, that they are influenced by any other principles than those of Interest, is to look for what never did, and I fear never will happen. . . . The few therefore, who act upon Principles of disinterestedness, are, comparatively speaking, no more than a drop in the Ocean." This, I fear, is not very inspiring; it is merely damn true.

One sees the element of self-interest in Washington's own early military career. The sense of *amour-propre* was early, and highly, developed in him. Throughout his career his concern for what he called "my reputation" was always keen. "My inclinations," he early announced, "are bent to arms." As a young man, commissioned a major, he was sent off on a scouting expedition by the Governor of Virginia to the Ohio territory to take a reading of the strength of the French and the disposition of the Indians thereabouts. On this and a second expedition to Ohio, Washington was confronted by frontier conditions of hardship and, far from being vanquished, rather enjoyed it; he found, too, that he dealt well, through moral force, with Indians; and he survived at least two very close calls—once coming near to drowning, another time when he was fired upon at close range—neither of which seems to have lessened his ardor for the military life.

But his military career was far from upward and onward. He suffered a loss in the French-Indian wars, and was forced to capitulate, though allowed to return to Williamsburg with his defeated troops. Later he fought with the British Generals

[1] GEORGE WASHINGTON: Writings, ed. by *John Rhodehamel.* The Library of America. $40.00.

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Braddock and Forbes in various Virginia militia units, but he found his power was often superseded, his rank diminished, by regular British army officers. Colonial troops took second place to English ones. Washington did not take this easily. His pride was stung when, in 1754, his rank was to be reduced from colonel to captain, with a great reduction in the number of troops under his command. To be a Colonial captain meant, as he put it, being outranked by "every Captain, bearing the King's commission, every half-pay officer, or other, appearing with such a commission."

Status was at stake. British regular army officers looked down at Colonial officers, referring to them as "jockies," knocking their want of training. When a compromise of sorts—giving him a company instead of a regiment to command—was arranged, Washington found he could not live with it. "I think," he noted, "the disparity between the present offer of a company and my former rank too great to expect any real satisfaction or enjoyment in a corps where I once did, or thought I had a right, to command." He read it as an attack on his reputation, and he promptly resigned.

In *George Washington, Man and Monument*, Marcus Cunliffe, the English historian of American culture, remarks "there is something unlikable about the George Washington of 1753–58," or the Washington between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-six. But then there tends generally to be something off-putting about young men—and now, one must add, young women—whose ambitions are not in proper alignment with their talents. (One recalls Henry James, at roughly the same age, writing home to say that he soon expects his talent to catch up with his ambition, which of course it did.) Often, too, these ambitions are unlikely to have found their proper objects. The result is that the ambition in the young seems so blatant, so raw, so unconnected to anything but sheer getting ahead. Cunliffe recounts how Washington "did everything feasible to win preferment . . . —everything, that is, short of dishonor."

Honor, most commentators on Washington tend to agree, was at the heart of Washington's character. But honor, too, can be an empty thing, if not attached to something greater than itself. And too great a concern for one's honor can leave a young man puffed up with his own importance, touchier than a fresh burn, nervous

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about status, perpetually on the *qui vive* for insults. And so it sometimes left the youthful George Washington. The coveting of honor, like the clinging to virginity, can be overdone, if neither has a greater object in view than love of itself.

Who would have guessed that, in George Washington's case, the object would become revolution? Well, if not precisely the object, then at least the background for his ambition. Very far from a revolutionary type, Washington, when he resigned his commission, returned to Mount Vernon to cultivate his garden, to become the very model of the successful gentleman planter. It was at this time, 1759, that Washington married. Always precocious in his responsibilities, he was only twenty-seven but, as a stepfather and a landowner, seemed much older. He was the brother to whom all the surviving Washington brothers and sisters looked for advice and help. He was elected a burgess in the Virginia House of Assembly; he served as a county magistrate. He grew prosperous, larger in mind, more expansive in spirit. "Worldly success spoils many people," Marcus Cunliffe writes, "it suited Washington."

With the French no longer an enemy after the peace of 1763, Americans began to feel the cinch of English rule tighten uncomfortably. Their status as a colony began to pall upon, then gall, them. The best face that might be put on American status was that the country was in partnership with England, since most American colonists were English in their ancestry; the more realistic reading, however, was that they were the possession of England. "Is it the interest of a man," Tom Paine asked in *Common Sense*, his pamphlet of 1776, "to be a boy all his life?" Relatively mild though the taxes England placed on America might have been—on tea, on stamps, on other taxable import goods—they were of sufficient irritation to rouse radicals and turn even sober men to soberish thoughts of independence.

Inevitably, Washington's tended to be the thoughtful businessman's view of English-American relations—as witness, in a letter to an in-law in London, his *précis* of the likely consequence of the Stamp Act:

> The stamp act engrosses the conversation of the speculative part of the colonists, who look upon this unconstitutional method of taxation as a direful attack upon their liberties and loudly exclaim against the

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> violation. What may be the result of this and of some other (I think I may add ill-judged) measures, I will not undertake to determine; but this much I may venture to affirm, that the advantage accruing to the mother country will fall greatly short of the expectation of the ministry; for certain it is that our whole substance already in a manner flows to Great Britain and that whatsoever contributes to lessen our importations must be hurtful to her manufactures. The eyes of our people already begin to be opened, and they will perceive that many luxuries for which we lavish our substance in Great Britain can well be dispensed with. This, consequently, will introduce frugality and be a necessary incitement to industry.

In the movement to pull away from England, George Washington was a moderate, a middle-of-the-road man. He was one of the seven-member delegation sent by Virginia to the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia in the autumn of 1774. He is reported not to have said much—to have let Patrick Henry and others supply the rhetoric. He was appointed to attend the Second Continental Congress. At that Congress, when it was decided that a general "be appointed to command all the continental forces raised for the defence of American liberty," Washington found his name put in formal nomination and unanimously elected. (John Hancock also considered himself a candidate for the post, though Hancock had no direct experience of war.)

Although Washington's military experience was not great, it was more impressive than that of anyone else. With some trepidation, Washington accepted. After acknowledging the honor he felt conferred upon him, he added: "But, lest some unlucky event should happen unfavorable to my reputation, I beg it may be remembered by every gentleman in the room, that I this day declare, with the utmost sincerity, I do not think myself equal to the command." Note his concern, once again, for his "reputation." He offered to serve without pay, asking only that his expenses be paid. He was forty-three; eight years later, when the war for independence had been won, he would be fifty-one and seem an old man.

George Washington's quality as commanding general quickly became the subject of myth—which could only mean that it would later become the subject of controversy. No sooner was Washington made commander-in-chief than the idolization of him set in in earnest. The physician Benjamin Rush, who would

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later be a persistent critic of Washington, saw in him the very model of the great military man: "If you do not know General Washington's person," Rush wrote to a friend, "perhaps you will be pleased to hear, that he has so much martial dignity in his deportment, that you would distinguish him to be a General and a Soldier, from among ten thousand people: there is not a king in Europe but would look like a valet de chambre by his side." Before he had fought a single battle, Harvard provided him with an honorary Doctor of Laws degree. The Washington who was "First in war—first in peace—first in the hearts of his countrymen"—the phrasing is Lighthorse Harry Lee's—had begun in earnest. Wherever he went, adoration followed.

The historian Barry Schwartz, in *George Washington, The Making of an American Symbol,* writes that, in having been imbued by his countrymen with greatness, Washington "filled critical social needs as the colonists took their first steps toward nationhood. By identifying with him, Americans could articulate their own stake in the war and justify their personal sacrifice." Schwartz continues:

> At the same time, Washington's greatness embodied a faithful representation of something that was impersonal and objective. It gave voice to each individual's feeling that outside of him there existed something greater than him. By choosing Washington as a symbol of this transcendent entity, Americans communicated their ideals to one another. Through him, they expressed their sense of moral harmony, their common attachment to a new political unity. George Washington—or, more precisely, the idea of George Washington—was essential to America's military arousal and to her incipient national consciousness.

Barry Schwartz is persuasive on the enormous symbolic importance of George Washington to the new republic, but, having agreed to that, the question remains open about how good a military man Washington really was. "Washington was, by far," Prof. Schwartz remarks, "more of an administrator than a fighter." He sets out in detail General (as he now is) Washington's tasks, administrative and diplomatic, through his eight-year term as commander-in-chief, and they were immense and intricately complex. Washington had, after all, to lead a unified army in a country of thirteen different states that, despite their declaration

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of independence, had not come to regard themselves as truly unified at all.

Richard Brookhiser, in *The Founding Father*, notes that between 1776 and 1778 Washington's troops fought seven battles and won only two. But because he was perpetually undermanned and undersupplied—his negotiations with Congress to acquire the funds to keep his army afield is an entire saga unto itself, and his complaints about having to deal with militia rather than regular army troops make for an *Iliad* of woe—Washington was forced to devise an essentially defensive strategy through the war, and one in which it made sense, as Washington himself put it, "to protract the war, if possible." As Mr. Brookhiser writes: "By fighting an aggressive defensive, which was also fluid, [Washington] raised the cost of victory for the British to an unacceptable level. With four thirty-thousand-man armies—one for each major theatre—Britain could have won a war of strangulation. But Britain could not maintain four thirty-thousand-man armies three thousand miles from home"—at least not for long. Mr. Brookhiser's final evaluation of Washington's generalship seemed nicely measured: "If you are a [military] prodigy or a genius, an Alexander or a Caesar, then you bring victory from whatever you touch. Washington was not in that class. But a successful general does not have to be the best general in the world. All he has to be—or if he is not so already, all he has to become—is better than the general he faces." And this Washington proved to be.

Reading about George Washington's years at the head of the revolutionary army, one senses his enormous development. Patience, cunning, meticulous care for detail, moral ferocity, courage, a sense of the larger campaign, Washington called upon all these qualities in his command and more—including, when it was called for, ruthlessness. At one point, there was a plot to poison Washington through the bad offices of one of his Lifeguard; it was, of course, foiled and the man hanged. A cabal in Congress led by one Thomas Conway was organized to unseat him from power, on the grounds that he was not prosecuting the war aggressively enough; on his deathbed, Conway apologized for his instigations. Colleagues betrayed him—most disappointingly, Benedict Arnold, a brilliant young soldier. John Adams was often critical of him.

At one point, in the winter of 1783, at Newburgh, New York, the

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Continental troops, including the officers, their pay deeply in arrears owing to a financially strapped Congress, were on the edge of rebellion. Washington, always the advocate of his men in these matters, met with the mutinous-minded officer corps to calm them and counsel caution. After his best advice, which did not seem to persuade, Washington paused to read a letter he had received, supposedly from a sympathetic congressman. But before doing so, he recalled that he could no longer read without the aid of spectacles. "I have already grown gray in the service of my country," he said. "I am now going blind." The brief ad-lib remark won the day. The men felt a connection with their powerfully aloof general that they hadn't hitherto sensed. Before Washington had his spectacles in place, the rebellion was over. Recapitulating the story, Thomas Jefferson wrote: "The moderation and virtue of a single character probably prevented this Revolution from being closed [as it might have been at that moment], as most others have been, by a subversion of that liberty it was intended to establish."

Although the tributes to Washington never ceased during the war, some of them beginning to take on religious coloration, with Washington regularly styled the Moses of the American people, one senses a deep loneliness about the man. He had young men around him whom he relied upon, such as Alexander Hamilton, and others whom he loved, such as the Marquis de Lafayette, but no close friends of his own age. He seemed to view command and aloofness as connected, as if the former required the latter. Edmund S. Morgan speaks of Washington's "aloof dignity." Gordon S. Wood believes that he cultivated his aloofness. "His aloofness was notorious and he worked at it," Wood writes. Wood tells the story of the painter Gilbert Stuart attempting to relax Washington during one of his portrait sittings, but without much success. "Now sir," he pleaded, "you must let me forget that you are General Washington and that I am Stuart, the painter." To which Washington replied: "Mr. Stuart need never feel the need of forgetting who he is or who General Washington is." "No wonder," says Wood, capping the story, "the portraits look stiff."

In *Angel in the Whirlwind*, his book on the American Revolution, the historian Benson Bobrick quotes the Marquis de Barbe-Marbois, secretary to the French legation, on Washington at his daily work:

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> [Washington] received us with a noble, modest, and gentle urbanity and with that graciousness which seems to be the basis of his character. He is fifty years old, well built, rather thin. He carries himself freely and with a sort of military grace. He is masculine looking, without his features being less gentle on that account. I have never seen anyone who was more naturally and spontaneously polite. His eyes are blue and rather large, his mouth and nose are regular, and his forehead open. His uniform is exactly like that of his soldiers. Formerly, on solemn occasions, that is to say on the days of battle, he wore a large blue sash, but he has given up that unrepublican distinction. I have been told that he preserves in battle the character of humanity which makes him so dear to his soldiers in camp. I have seen him for some time in the midst of his staff, and he has always appeared even-tempered, tranquil, and orderly in his occupations, and serious in his conversation. He asks few questions, listens attentively, and answers in a low tone and with few words. He is serious in business. Outside of that he permits himself a restricted gaiety. His conversation is as simple as his habits and his appearance. He makes no pretensions, and does the honors of his house with dignity, but without pompousness or flattery. . . .

After the final defeat of Cornwallis at Yorktown on October 17, 1783, when in a rather bloodless conclusion to a long and bloody war, a British officer appeared waving a white handkerchief aloft, signaling surrender, Washington must have thought he could think of retirement at last. But of course it was not to be—not for a long while yet.

At a diplomatic dinner at Versailles, after hearing Louis XVI, in a toast, compared to "the moon, [which] fills the earth with a soft, benevolent glow," and the British ambassador compare George III to "the sun at noonday, [which] spreads its light and illumines the world," Ben Franklin rose to say, "I cannot give you the sun or the moon, but I give you George Washington, General of the armies of the United States, who, like Joshua of old, commanded both the sun and moon to stand still, and both obeyed."

Washington's own departure from his troops also took the form of a toast. The toast was given on December 4, 1783, the day he departed to resign his commission before Congress. In New York City, he met with his ranking officers in a long room at an inn known as Fraunces Tavern, and, with a glass of wine before him, said: "With a heart full of love and gratitude, I now take leave of you. I most devoutly wish that your latter days be as prosperous and happy as your former ones have been glorious and honor-

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able. I cannot come to each of you to take my leave, but shall be obliged if each of you will come and take me by the hand."

Immediately after all the officers had done so, Washington, in Benson Bobrick's account, "himself 'suffused in tears,' left the room and, passing through a corps of light infantry, walked silently on to Whitehall, where a barge was waiting to convey him across the Hudson to Paulus Hook. 'We all followed,' wrote one officer, 'in mournful silence to the wharf.' "

The Marquis de Barbe-Marbois concluded his account of his visit to Washington by noting that, "if you like historical parallels, I might compare him to Timoleon who freed the Sicilians from the tyranny of the Carthaginians, and who joined to his military qualities those which make up an excellent citizen, and who after having rendered his country signal services lived as a private citizen, ambitious neither of power nor honors, and was satisfied to enjoy modestly the glory of having given liberty to a powerful nation."

Gordon S. Wood holds that "the greatest act of [Washington's] life, the one that made him famous, was his resignation as commander-in-chief of the American forces." The act was without precedent. It announced the subservience of military to civil authority in United States life. It is an act that has reverberated down through American history.

Yet when the federal convention to write a constitution met in Philadelphia in 1787, there could scarcely be any doubt that Virginia would send Washington along as one of its delegates. He was hesitant about attending—he had, after all, pledged his retirement from public life. His word, and hence his reputation, was once more on the line. But he was nervous, too, about people thinking that he wasn't behind the new government—and indeed that he might even want to form a government of his own. In Philadelphia, he was in fact elected president of the convention. Washington had his doubts about the workability of the new constitution, but, because his name was associated with it, he supported it thoroughly. "Once he had identified himself publicly with the new Constitution he became very anxious to have it accepted," Gordon S. Wood writes. "Its ratification was a kind of ratification of himself."

When, in February of 1789, it came time to elect a chief executive, there was scarcely the least surprise that Washington

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was unanimously elected. It is not the least exaggeration to say that no one else could have filled the job of President of the United States. With the Americans' vast distrust of political power, with a newly but barely fledged country made up of people with the strongest regional differences, not to say strong mutual antipathies, with a reigning commercial spirit of every man for himself abroad in the land, the job of president could only have been taken up by a man in whom the country felt the deepest trust. George Washington was, of course, that man.

Even then there was worry, lest Washington take on monarchical powers. Everyone seems agreed that, had he chosen, he could have had even greater power than he did. It is said that such powers as a distrustful Congress allowed the presidency were based on the knowledge that Washington was the man who would first hold the job. That Washington had no children and that, consequently, no dynasty was likely was a point in his favor. The historian Richard Norton Smith refers to Washington's being "a charisma of competence," one based on utter trust. James Madison felt that Washington was the lynchpin to the new government, the only part of it that greatly pleased and excited the people.

Washington knew himself how difficult lay the terrain ahead. A year or so into the job, he wrote to an English correspondent: "Nothing short of an absolute conviction of duty could ever have brought me upon scenes of public life again. The establishment of our new government seemed to be the last great experiment for promoting happiness by reasonable compact in civil society . . . a government of accommodation as well as a government of laws. Much has to be done by *prudence*, much by *conciliation*, and much by *firmness*. Few who are not philosophical spectators can realize the difficult and delicate part which a man in my situation has to act . . . if I may use the expression, I walk on untrodden ground."

Walk thus Washington did for eight years, for when his first term was up, he was told—by Madison among others—that his presence was required for at least another full term to make the government stable. A third term was probably his for the asking, but in the end he was glad to be quits of political power.

George Washington was a great president who did not necessarily have a great presidency. He was fortunate, for one thing, in

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that for almost the entirety of his time in office the country was at peace. The great achievements that occurred during his time in office—Alexander Hamilton's financial program, the opening of the Mississippi River, the removal of the threat of Indians and redcoats in the Northwest, the American role of neutrality in foreign affairs—were accomplished without his having much to do with them. But the details seem scarcely to matter. "Time only renders the character of Washington more clear," as J. T. Headley has written, "while the circumstances which developed it become more and more indistinct."

Washington legitimated the presidency in a way that no one else could have done. He set many useful precedents, not least among them limiting the Senate's role in the making of treaties and in the appointment of government officials. He graced the job with a dignity that it has not lost more than two hundred years later and under much lesser men. Without Washington, United States history would have a different shape and contour; without him, it would have had a different moral coloration.

Although he understood power and knew how to use it, unlike the case with almost every other political leader of his importance, there is no strong evidence that George Washington loved power, either for its own sake or for the perquisites that it brought him. He was a thoughtful but not a speculative man, and neither is there any serious evidence that he had a strong vision for America, a vision of stately grandeur or of human happiness. Why, then, did he accept the most arduous service his nation offered, not once but over and over again?

Because, the only answer is, of a profound sense of duty that derived from his, Washington's, moral character. "Moral character" is the name Gordon S. Wood gives to this quality in Washington, and it is the only way to account for the continual tests to which Washington put himself, throughout his life, depriving himself of the leisure and contentment of the private life for which he always longed. His retirement was short-lived, for he died in 1799, three years after he left office. He died, it is reported, stoically, in pain and with no last words of wisdom on his lips. If his life seems sacred, it is because it seems in the final analysis sacrificial, a donation to the state.

Moral character is what we continue to ask of all our politicians, and it is of course precisely what they almost always refuse to

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supply. Each generation of our politicians today, at the end of their careers, happily peddle their influence in large law firms, or simply set up as straight lobbyists for causes in which they can have no real belief. Washington would have been aghast—as he was aghast at the factionalization, holding party above principle, that political life in the United States began to take on in his last years in office.

Behind Washington's rigid sense of honor—and his ceaseless worry about his reputation—was really a concern that he show proper disinterest and never take advantage of his influence. This is sometimes said to be a purely eighteenth-century quality—and Washington is himself sometimes said to be the last great eighteenth-century political leader. He believed that honorable conduct was crucial to public life. He believed that a political leader needed to surmount the parochial interests of party. He believed that good character meant more than anything else—than special interest, than idealism, than any theoretical concerns—and worked to develop a character of the kind in himself that proved his point. Washington was not a great military mind; he was a good though not a saintly man; he was no master politician. In the end, his genius was perhaps the rarest kind of all: a genius for discerning right action so strong that he was utterly incapable of knowingly doing anything wrong. He was our founding father, and our politics has yet to turn up a better man.

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SUSAN BALÉE

From the Outside In: A History of American Autobiography

We are living in an autobiographical era, as readers all over America can readily attest. According to Paul Gray, writing in an April 1997 issue of *Time*, memoirs have now replaced novels as the major American publishing product, with hundreds brought out every year, many by first-time writers. These recent memoirs deal with topics once reserved for fiction—child abuse, alcoholism, mental illness, incest—and some critics wish that fiction is where such "taboo" subjects would stay. Those who deplore the upsurge in self-writing note its emphasis on narcissism and self-pity: one such critic even titled his review of the new memoirs, "Read About Why I Love Me and How Much I've Suffered."[1]

These critics, however, may be missing the point of the self-absorbed narrative—the narcissist dwells on herself not because she has a strong self-identity, but because her sense of self is so very fragile. Autobiography stems from the need to construct a durable self, an identity that is clear and clearly differentiated from all others. Indeed, for the first three hundred years of American self-writing, autobiographers had the task of both constructing themselves and building a national identity; the well-known phrase "American individualism" suggests the double goal. The invention of America began as it does in every other nation: with words.

National identity emerges and coalesces in the literature of a nation. Settlers tell themselves who they are and why they're here, and then export their identity with all the other products of a new country. In the early nineteenth century, America's cultural identity resonated in the words of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Puritans and Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's Southern frontiersmen

[1] Article by Michael Rust in 2 June 1997 issue of *Insight on the News*.

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as clearly as it must have emanated from the bales of cotton, barrels of whale blubber, crates of cranberries, jugs of maple sugar, stacks of beaver pelts and freshly-sawn hardwoods, hogsheads of molasses, sheaves of tobacco, pots of indigo, gaggles of geese, and bushels of maize that emerged from the holds of sailing ships recently returned to Europe from the New World.

Europeans stepped onto the shores of North America and cast off their Old World selves like salt-stained garments. Very quickly, the new land defined Americans: they carved a fresh identity out of the wilderness; they differentiated themselves from the English and other Europeans as well as from the Native Americans; they rebelled against the mother country and its patriarchal demands, even as they modified its old customs and laws to suit the new community. By breaking away from England, Americans gained a sense of national identity far more quickly than, say, Canada, their sibling colony to the north.

As Puritans and Protestants and Christians concerned with spiritual salvation, Americans quickly contrasted themselves with the heathens—the Indian peoples—living in their midst. Outside forces—wars and winters and pestilence—helped Americans to define themselves. So did the experience of religious oppression, slavery, immigration. For three hundred years, the majority of American autobiographies reflected individual identities constructed in response to external pressures.

But in the space of a scant five decades, all of that has changed. Americans have ceased to see themselves as primarily shaped by external events. Instead, American autobiography has moved from the outside in. In this century, the external forces that forged individual identities up through the 1940s—the Depression, the First and Second World Wars, the rise of industry and technology, the assimilation of immigrants—took a step inward in the 1950s. In fact, the last generation of American writers who felt themselves largely at the mercy of historical forces came of age in the twenties and thirties—they were the writers and artists who formed part of America's "Lost Generation" after World War I.

Alienated from mainstream American values, they rebelled against the established culture. In addition to a great deal of thinly-disguised autobiographical fiction, anguished coming-of-age autobiographies and later, regretful memoirs were penned by Eugene O'Neill, Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest

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Hemingway up through World War II. These were the works of giant writers and they cast long shadows. That may be why the generation of autobiographers who came after them—including Norman Mailer, Malcolm X, Jack Kerouac, and Mary McCarthy—had to be particularly audacious in order to be original.

The Cold War generation's writers, then, began to look inward to find the sources of self-identity. Several of these autobiographers discovered that their identities derived not from the pressure of external, historical forces, but quite literally from forces within the family. Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*,[2] published serially in *The New Yorker* between 1946 and 1957, presents a self shaped by family dynamics. McCarthy's parents died during the Spanish influenza epidemic in 1918, when she was six years old, and she and her brothers were sent to live with a great aunt and her husband in Minneapolis. The impetus for McCarthy's autobiography is the unfair treatment she endured at the hands of these guardians. Further, she recognizes that if her parents had not died, she would probably not have become a writer, nor her brother Kevin McCarthy an actor.

> If [my parents] had both lived, we would have been a united Catholic family, rather middle class and wholesome. I would probably be a Child of Mary. I can see myself married to an Irish lawyer and playing golf and bridge, making occasional retreats and subscribing to a Catholic Book Club.

Her parents were beautiful people, though her father, she later discovers, was also a spendthrift and a binge drinker. But all of this she forgives, because they enter the realm of Ideal Parents before she ever has a chance to see them as equals and, also, because "I could not accept the idea that anyone beautiful could be bad." When she arrives at the home of the great aunt delegated by her father's parents to raise the orphans, her life as Cinderella begins. But McCarthy, far from coming off as a pathetic victim, mints a new version of the underdog: Cinderella-with-an-Attitude. She observes acidly, "Even if my guardians had been nice, I should probably not have liked them because they were so unpleasing to look at and their grammar and accents

[2] Mary McCarthy, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (New York, 1957, 1981).

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were so lacking in correctness. I had been rudely set down in a place where beauty was not a value at all."

Although it is not her *own* parents McCarthy blames for her wretched childhood, the fact that her oppressors are within the family rather than outside of it marks this autobiography as a path-breaker. In *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood,* McCarthy opens the closet door on her family's secrets and inaugurates the "tell-all" genre of American autobiography. She publicly indicts her grandparents for permitting their son's children to suffer in front of them. Her wealthy, rosy-cheeked and white-haired grandfather, originally appears to Mary and her brothers as beneficent, in keeping with "the family myth."

> We were too poor, spiritually speaking, to question his generosity, to ask why he allowed us to live in oppressed chill and deprivation at a long arm's length from himself and hooded his genial blue eye with a bluff, millionairish grey eyebrow whenever the evidence of our suffering presented itself at his knee.

Perhaps because of McCarthy's belief that no one beautiful can be truly bad, her handsome old grandfather escapes serious criticism. Alas, his wife, her Grandmother McCarthy, doesn't get off the hook as easily. In fact, Mary McCarthy positively gigs her on the spear-point of her prose as "an ugly, severe old woman, with a monstrous balcony of a bosom," a cruelly ungenerous old lady who "was a great adherent of the give-them-an-inch-and-they'll-take-a-mile theory of hospitality, [who] never, so far as I can remember, offered any caller the slightest refreshment, regarding her own conversation as sufficiently wholesome and sustaining."

Despite the fact that "all of the paraphernalia of motherliness were hers," this grandmother's identity remained that of "a cold, grudging, disputatious old woman" in the eyes of her granddaughter. The autobiography form itself allows McCarthy to unmask the cruelty of her grandmother without forcing her to explain it. As she notes, "luckily, I am writing a memoir and not a work of fiction, and therefore I do not have to account for my grandmother's unpleasing character."

An unpleasing character, however, is not necessarily an abusive one. In the lexicon of social workers, Grandmother McCarthy may have "neglected" her orphaned grandchildren, but she did

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not actively abuse them. Their new guardians, Myers and Margaret, become the real villains of this autobiography because Myers does actively abuse the children, both emotionally and physically. Curiously, he nevertheless remains beyond the pale of the family, even as he rules the roost. The first two sentences of the "The Tin Butterfly," the chapter detailing some of his more iniquitous deeds, announces, "The man we had to call Uncle Myers was no relation to us. This was a point on which we four orphan children were very firm." Although McCarthy is breaking new ground with an autobiography that details child abuse, she is careful to assert that the abuse was not at the hands of an actual parent. Revelations of that sort of abuse appear much later, in popular autobiographies such as Christina Crawford's *Mommie Dearest*, and literary ones such as Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club.*

Still, at the hands of Myers, the McCarthy children "were beaten all the time, as a matter of course." Their mouths were taped shut at night to prevent "mouth breathing," their poor diet of root vegetables was supplemented with daily doses of castor oil and, on weekends year round, even at 20 below zero, the children were forced outside to "play" for six hours a day. They were not allowed to have friends or toys because, "our lives, in order to be open, had to be empty." Naturally, this regimen failed to achieve its goal; instead, Mary and her brothers managed to contrive a rich inner life, telling each other stories in lieu of playing with toys, and living in their imaginations in lieu of external stimulation.

At last the sad story ends, as all Cinderella memoirs do, when Mary is rescued by her Grandfather Preston, her mother's father, who suspects and then uncovers the abuses endured by his only daughter's children. Alas, Cinderella's brothers don't fare as well; they are packed off to a Midwestern boarding school, where they remain even during holidays—only Mary escapes entirely and is restored to a life of wealth and privilege in Seattle. Still, the memory of her mistreatment no doubt instilled in her what Richard Rhodes, recalling his own abusive childhood (described in *A Hole in the World*), terms "a rage to speak" (and its accompanying goal, to be heard and validated). In McCarthy's words, "The injustices my brothers and I had suffered in our childhood had made me a rebel against authority, but they had also prepared me to fall in love with justice, the first time I encountered it."

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Nevertheless, McCarthy must question how just her own motives are in telling a story that indicts—or at least reveals—the inner life of her family. An Irish presentiment of doom darkens her prose when she observes, "starting to tell that story now, to publish it, so to speak, abroad, I feel a distinct uneasiness. . . . If I believed in the afterlife, I would hold my peace." Fortunately for literature, she publishes her piece, and provides a bridge for many important autobiographers who follow her. After *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood,* the family loses its sacred, private, status; it ceases to be exempt from the scrutiny of memoirists.

By the 1960s, the tell-all-about-how-my-family-shaped-me autobiographies have produced some very powerful testaments of self-identity. One of the best of these is Loren Eiseley's *The Unexpected Universe,* a collection of autobiographical essays published in 1969. In one of these essays, "The Star Thrower,"[3] Eiseley slowly recognizes that his way of perceiving the world comes—both genetically and socially—from his mother, who spent much of her life on the edge of mental chaos.

> It began . . . with the skull and the eye. I was the skull. I was the inhumanly stripped skeleton without voice, without hope, wandering alone upon the shores of the world. . . . There was, in this desiccated skull, only an eye . . . a search beam revolving endlessly in sunless noonday or black night.

Eiseley, an anthropologist, writes of wind and weather and tribes, of tricksters and dualism. He notes that humans have almost always believed their lives were caught between the dual forces of good and evil. But it is clearly his own identity that Eiseley is trying to find as he looks back to the origins of humans. "We gaze backwards into a contracting cone of life until words leave us and all we know is dissolved into the simple circuits of a reptilian brain." Our lives as humans are merely constructs, Eiseley argues, "Our identity is a dream."

The image of the searching eye continues to haunt Eiseley; he struggles to identify the eye that is so mingled with his "I." His mind's eye casts him back on childhood images.

[3] This essay was reprinted in Loren Eiseley, *The Star Thrower* (New York, 1978).

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> There was the beaten, bloodshot eye of an animal from somewhere within my childhood experience. Finally there was an eye that seemed torn from a photograph, but that looked through me as though it had already raced in vision up to the steep edge of nothingness and absorbed whatever terror lay in the abyss. . . . I knew the eye and the circumstance and the question. It was my mother. She was long dead, and the way backward was lost.

Eiseley shifts away from the eye whose gaze he cannot bear for long; he cloaks himself again in the protective garb of the anthropologist, the man of science. He diverts his personal narrative to speak of Darwin and Einstein and Freud, but in the end, the persistent memory of the skull and eye brings him home. Home to his childhood house, to a satchel he discovers after his parents are dead; in it, he finds a lock of his mother's hair and a note, "This satchel belongs to my son, Loren Eiseley," written in his mother's hand.

In the satchel, he finds a photo of his mother and her sister, taken when his mother was six years old in Dyersville, Iowa (the "dire place," he realizes suddenly, reflecting on the word).

> Six years old, I thought, turning momentarily away from the younger child's face. Here it began, her pain and mine. The eyes in the photograph were already remote and shadowed by some inner turmoil. The poise of the body was already that of one miserably departing the peripheries of the human estate. The gaze was mutely clairvoyant and lonely. It was the gaze of a child who knew unbearable difference and impending isolation. . . . All her life she had walked the precipice of mental breakdown. Here on this faded porch it had begun—the long crucifixion of life.

At this point, Eiseley realizes how absolutely he is his mother's son. His view of humanity grows likewise dark; he sees the history of the species as "a tale of desolations." Walking along the beach at Sanibel Island, Florida, the beach he identifies as a coast "set apart for shipwreck," he feels this desolation fully.

Eiseley, an emotionally-drowning "I" at this point in his memoir, finds unexpected salvation in the act of "a star thrower": literally, a man throwing living starfish back into the sea. This man, whom Eiseley had at first deemed a madman, suddenly looks more like a brother, a fellow human. The star thrower is actually saving the starfish before they suffocate on the shore, and Eiseley stoops to help him. "I picked up a star whose tube feet

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ventured timidly among my fingers while, like a true star, it cried soundlessly for life." Eiseley imagines god flinging real stars, somewhere else in the universe. "Perhaps he, too, was lonely, and the end toward which he labored remained hidden—even as with ourselves."

Eiseley, in the act of throwing stars, transcends his mother's legacy; it doesn't crush him as her life did her. "Somewhere, my thought persisted, there is a hurler of stars, and he walks, because he chooses, always in desolation, but not in defeat."

Vivian Gornick, perhaps the best-known autobiographer of the my-mother-made-me-who-I-am variety, is likewise a walker—she and her mother walk the streets of Manhattan, talking, fighting, connecting. Her memoir, *Fierce Attachments* (1987), describes a daughter bound, for better or worse, to her deeply demanding mother. Gornick and her mother have a relationship that contemporary psychologists would doubtless term "co-dependent," but "co-combative" might be a better description. They fight to live, they live to fight, and in argument they find intimacy.

> "So, I'm reading the biography you gave me," [my mother] says. I look at her, puzzled, and then I remember. "Oh!" I smile in wide delight. "Are you enjoying it?"
>
> "*Listen*," she begins. The smile drops off my face and my stomach contracts. That "listen" means she is about to trash the book I gave her to read. She is going to say, "What. What's here? What's here that I don't already know? I *lived* through it. I know it all. What can this writer tell me that I don't already know? Nothing. To *you* it's interesting, but to me? How can this be interesting to me?"
>
> . . . . Invariably, when she speaks so, my head fills with blood and before the sentences have stopped pouring from her mouth I am lashing out at her. . . . However, in the past year an odd circumstance has begun to obtain. On occasion, my head fails to fill with blood. I become irritated but remain calm. Not falling into a rage, I do not make a holocaust of the afternoon.

They fail to fight because of Gornick's forbearance, and then the daughter learns something important about her mother. They walk silently for blocks, and then her mother again mentions the book her daughter gave her.

> "That Josephine Herbst," my mother says. "She certainly carried on, didn't she?"

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> Relieved and happy, I hug her. "She didn't know what she was doing either, Ma, but yes, she carried on."
>
> "I'm jealous," my mother blurts at me. "I'm jealous she lived her life, I didn't live mine."

Gornick writes this memoir of herself and her mother when she is herself middle-aged and her mother is old. Old, but not dead—still alive and able to witness her daughter's revelations about the two of them. *Fierce Attachments*, however, is not the *Mommy, Dearest* revenge memoir it might at first seem. Instead, it is a far more complex, more subtle autobiography of a mother/daughter dyad. Their bond occurs at the point where separate worlds intersect—the immigrant world of the Russian-born mother, the urbane world of the Manhattan-born daughter—and the City itself serves as the place where, for generations, different worlds have co-existed.

Vivian Gornick has written elsewhere[4] that the current boom in memoir-writing is simply the response to a postmodern "need to testify," to share truths with others. Interestingly, however, these truths follow the path of a late-twentieth-century course of psychotherapy: autobiographers move from recognition of abuse and consequent anger (McCarthy), to depression about their roles as victims (Eiseley), to ultimate acceptance of the relationship with the offending parent (Gornick). The difference between the revelations of such truths lies not in the experiences, but in the audience for them—revelations that were once reserved only for the ears of the therapist, are now trumpeted to the world for all to hear and judge.

In an attempt to catch the attention of readers no longer shocked by what memoirists are willing to confess about themselves, writers have had to become increasingly outrageous to gather an audience. Kathryn Harrison, for example, has dynamited her own private gold shaft out of the mountain of autobiographies dealing with familial sexual abuse. Her memoir, *The Kiss* (1997), turns the concept of child-sexually-victimized-by-adult on its head. Instead, Harrison writes the Daughter-Does-Daddy memoir of a gleeful victim. *The Kiss*, which has garnered a fair amount of outrage from critics, details Harrison's sexual

[4] Vivian Gornick, "Why Memoir Now?", *The Women's Review of Books*, July 1996.

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relationship with her own father—a relationship not forced upon her as a helpless child, but *chosen* by the adult Harrison.

It is difficult to imagine what, if anything, American autobiographers can do with the parent/child memoir after *The Kiss.*

In the 1960s, drug experimentation induced another series of reflections on inner states—altered ones. Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) is perhaps the best-known literary work about the drug-induced musings of the era, but the most *popular* ones were surely the "Don Juan" books of Carlos Castaneda, nine of which have been published since *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* appeared in 1968. In these books, Castaneda, a grad student in anthopology at UCLA, mingled his knowledge of medicinal plants used by Southwestern Indians with the received wisdom of his Yaqui mentor, Don Juan.

Mood-altering drugs such as peyote put Castaneda in an insightful mood, and he wrote spiritual advice worthy to brush covers with Kahlil Gibran on the counterculture bookshelf. Indeed, Castaneda's higher purpose in getting stoned stands out when compared to the self-reports of more mundane trippers of the time. Joan Didion, who covered a covey of LSD tab poppers in 1967[5] San Francisco, sat with them through an afternoon trip. She records the detailed description of the altered mental state related to her by one of the participants: "Wow."

As the drug-induced memoirs of the sixties and seventies attest, the primary impetus for autobiography had moved even further inward: the effects of inner experiences shaped the psychedelic self. The era's slogan was, "Tune in, turn on, drop out." Although Timothy Leary probably meant that young Americans should tune in to something larger than themselves—peace and love instead of war, for example—his mantra became far more self-referential for most of its practitioners who instead tuned into music, turned on to drugs, and dropped out of the establishment culture.

In another two decades, the autobiography of ill-health—in particular, memoirs by writers with cancer or AIDS—became a primary vehicle through which Americans achieved identity, the self shaped because of, or in spite of, the body. In a similar vein,

[5] Joan Didion, "Life Styles in the Golden Land," collected in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (New York, 1968).

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a spate of autobiographies about discovering one's (homo)sexuality appeared in the 1980s—again, the autobiographer revealed an identity formed in response to inner impulses rather than outer pressures. The best memoir of the period combines both: Paul Monette's *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* (1988).[6] If the autobiographies of drug users had focused on the body as the site of pleasurable experiences, the autobiographies of AIDS sufferers focused on it as the site of a protracted war—a battleground with no known survivors.

Monette himself uses the imagery of war to describe the way AIDS descended on the gay men of his generation.

> Then someone you know goes into the hospital, and suddenly you are at high noon in full battle gear. They have neglected to tell you that you will be issued no weapons of any sort. So you cobble together a weapon out of anything that lies at hand, like a prisoner honing a spoon handle into a stiletto. You fight tough, you fight dirty, but you cannot fight dirtier than it.

All you can do is watch the landscape of your body for signs that the enemy has invaded: night sweats, tongue sores, diarrhea, fevers, bruises that don't heal, weight loss. Monette soon found himself examining his body on a daily basis, "inch by inch as cowering people must have done in medieval plague cities, when X's were chalked on afflicted houses."

AIDS memoirs like Monette's differ from memoirs about other types of illness both because the virus was linked to homosexuality initially and also because it was transmissible.

> Has anything ever been quite like this? Bad enough to be stricken in the middle of life, but then to fear that your best and dearest will suffer exactly the same. Cancer and the heart don't sicken a man two ways like that.

The disease itself bred alienation and isolation in its sufferers—in those early days, jobs and careers were lost; victims were often abandoned by their lovers and families. As Monette details his beloved companion's deepening struggle with AIDS and his own reactions to Roger's decline, he observes, "Within three months,

[6] Monette's *On Becoming a Man* (San Diego, 1992) focuses more exclusively on his coming-of-age as a gay man.

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this sense of separateness [became] so acute that I didn't want to talk to anyone anymore who wasn't touched by AIDS, body or soul." Finally, the book reaches the point it has always been moving towards: Roger's death. But before he dies, Paul Monette has a chance both to cherish and memorialize their love. As he observed, "Loss teaches you very fast what cannot go without saying." Monette himself is now dead of AIDS, but this memoir will endure as a testament to the early years of the epidemic. In fact, Monette's reputation is likely to rest on this memoir and *On Becoming a Man.* His response to the assault on the body of his lover and then his own produced his best writing. Had he lived in another era, Monette would probably only have rated a footnote (as a minor poet and novelist) in the annals of literature; instead, he is likely to be remembered as one of the important recorders of gay life in the plague years of fin-de-millennium America.

If AIDS memoirs—like the illness itself—are on the wane in the 1990s, memoirs of madness are waxing. The book that inaugurated this genre of memoirs remains its classic: *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness,* by William Styron (1990). The novelist's account of his own descent into depression landed the book on bestseller lists for years. Styron gave readers a writerly account of his own personal tour of hell, realizing that depression is "so mysteriously painful and elusive in the way it becomes known to the self—the mediating intellect—as to verge close to being beyond description."

As Monette does with the symptoms of AIDS, Styron lists "some of [depression's] most sinister hallmarks: confusion, failure of mental focus and lapse of memory. At a later stage *my entire mind would be dominated by anarchic disconnections* [italics mine]." Styron's depression, which causes his mind to revolt, to be "dominated by anarchic disconnections," threatens his very sense of identity. American autobiography has come full circle when the memoir no longer serves to construct the self, but questions even the possibility of a stable identity. Autobiographies of insanity (temporary or otherwise) such as Styron's show that the inward movement of self-definition has reached not a core of identity, but a lacuna where that identity should be.

In fact, as his mental health worsens, Styron's consuming desire becomes oblivion; much of the book discusses the attractiveness of suicide for people enduring the despair of major depression.

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Unable to hang on to a sense of self-preservation, Styron recognizes that he's losing his mind. "I had now reached that phase of the disorder where all sense of hope had vanished, along with the idea of a futurity; my brain, in thrall to its outlaw hormones, had become less an organ of thought than an instrument registering, minute by minute, varying degrees of its own suffering."

At last, Styron's personality is so assailed by inner pain that it actually splits. The depressed autobiographer records the phenomenon of a second self, "a wraithlike observer who, not sharing the dementia of his double, is able to watch with dispassionate curiosity as his companion struggles against the oncoming disaster, or decides to embrace it."

Other memoirs of mental illness—borderline personality, autism, bipolar disorder—now abound. Some of the best of these are Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted* (1993), Donna Williams' "extraordinary autobiography of an autistic," *Nobody Nowhere* (1992), and several new books by psychotherapists writing about their own mental illnesses, including Kay Redfield Jamison's *An Unquiet Mind* (1995) and, most recently, Lauren Slater's *Welcome to My Country* (1996). The sequel to Slater's collection of memoirs, *Half-Life*, is due out in 1998, but an excerpt, "Black Swans," has already been reprinted in *Best American Essays 1997.*

"Black Swans" describes Slater's struggle with obsessive-compulsive disorder, another mental illness that robs an individual of selfhood by robbing her of self-will. Slater is at the mercy of counting rituals to get through a doorway, a page, a room, a day. Nevertheless, as Gornick found an island of independence in the ocean of her mother's presence, Slater finds one despite the tempest in her brain. "Part of me was still free, a private space not absolutely permeated by pain. A space I could learn to cultivate."

The question I want to cultivate here is this: How did American autobiography travel so far from its origins? How did autobiographies progress from firmly delineating individual identities to questioning even the possibility of a unified self? Perhaps what has been termed, in another context, "America's isolationist tendencies," has brought this nation to the brink of unthinking itself. Left to elaborate their paranoid fantasies—and paranoia has ever been a hallmark of American thought—contemporary autobiographers are busy dismantling the idea of a clear and transcendent identity one text at a time. The big picture seems to

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be dissolving into so many pixels; American identity, once so clearly demarcated from European identity, or Native American identity, has fragmented at the core—the *corpus callosum.* Contemporary American autobiography has turned back to the original questions: Who am I? Why am I here?

In the beginning, if you read the words of the early colonizers, Americans *knew* the answers to those questions. William Bradford's memoir *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1630–51), describes the pilgrims wrestling with the Wilderness, becoming who they are in the act of subduing their new landscape. Captain John Smith's accounts of the colonization of Virginia (1608–30), likewise detail the transformation of the new settlers from denizens of the Old World to crafters of the New. His accounts also initiate the American tradition of seeing the Indians as characters in the European drama of colonization rather than as the first voices of America.

The Puritan journalists—of whom there were scores—kept records of their lives in the same way they kept records of their household accounts; they *accounted for their lives* in a book of deeds and thoughts reminiscent of God's account book, the one the Bible says will be brought forth on Judgment Day. Everything in its place and a place for everything (America seemed to be the place for every thing). Although these Puritan writers were ostensibly concerned with their inner states, hence the term "spiritual autobiographies," such external factors as the wilderness bordering the New England colonies or invasions of the settlements by hostile Indian tribes invariably influenced their conversion narratives. Faith was achieved in adversity, grace through a spiritual progress paralleling the pilgrim's progress in subduing Nature. The early settlers saw themselves as pilgrims in both senses.

As the voices of women and minorities are largely missing from early American history, autobiographies marking the seventeenth-century colonial experience issued mainly from male pens; in addition to the memoirs of William Bradford and John Smith, other self-reflective writings of the period come from Thomas Shepard, Samuel Sewall, William Byrd, and Cotton and Increase Mather. Spiritual self-examinations by seventeenth-century women appeared in other genres: Anne Bradstreet's poetry, for example, or Anne Hutchinson's testimony at the trial

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that precipitated her banishment from Massachusetts—she believed God had spoken directly to her soul to tell her she was saved. The forefathers of Massachusetts had little patience for women who claimed access to the minds of supernatural beings—witches and antinomians alike could expect harsh treatment from the Puritans.

But what could a woman expect who had been captured by Indians and returned to tell the tale? Fame, apparently. *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682) was among the most popular prose works of its time. Rowlandson describes the day in early February of 1676 when the frontier village of Lancaster, Massachusetts, was attacked by Indians. Rowlandson watched her own house go up in flames around her.

> Now is the dreadful hour come, that I have often heard of (in time of war as it was the case of others), but now mine eyes see it. Some in our house were fighting for their lives, others wallowing in their blood, the house on fire over our heads, and the bloody heathen ready to knock us on the head if we stirred out. Now might we hear mothers and children crying out for themselves and one another, "Lord, What shall we do?"

The blazing fire made the choice inevitable; Mary took her children and left the house. The Indians shot her in the side, the bullet first going through the intestines of her young daughter Sarah whom Mary held in her arms. In the same mêlée, her brother-in-law and her nephew were murdered by the Indians. Mary Rowlandson's depiction of the horror had to have been riveting reading for her fellow Americans.

> There were twelve killed, some shot, some stabbed with their spears, some knocked down with their hatchets. When we are in prosperity, oh! the little that we think of such dreadful sights, and to see our dear friends and relations lie bleeding out their heartblood upon the ground. There was one who was chopped into the head with a hatchet, and stripped naked, and yet was crawling up and down. It is a solemn sight to see so many Christians lying in their blood, some here, and some there, like a company of sheep torn by wolves, all of them stripped naked by a company of hellhounds, roaring, singing, ranting, and insulting, as if they would have torn our very hearts out; yet the Lord by His almighty power preserved a number of us from death, for there were twenty-four of us taken alive and carried captive.

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Rowlandson's narrative sharply distinguishes between the Christians and the "heathen" Indians, between the wolves and the sheep, the predators and the victims. Although forced to live for eleven weeks with the Indians, her own identity builds in resistance to that of her captors. An autobiography like this one had to have encouraged early Americans to differentiate themselves from the natives whose land they were settling. Indeed, an account like this would have helped to justify the Indian removal bills that later became an accepted part of American domestic policy.[7]

What is worth remembering here, although it does not show up in the autobiographies of the times, is that the Christian settlers were equally barbaric in their treatment of the Indians. Mary Rowlandson's narrative takes place during King Philip's War and she ultimately encounters "King Philip" himself, the Wampanoag chief so named by the colonists for his proud manner. What Rowlandson does not mention is that when King Philip was killed in August 1676, the colonial militia ripped him limb from limb and hung his dismembered parts—and decapitated head—on trees. Another incident from the same period involved a group of Massachusetts women who, upon leaving church, encountered two Indian prisoners from Maine: these good Christian women tore them to pieces with their bare hands.[8]

Jonathan Edwards, a *rhetorically* violent Puritan, wrote what is probably the most important spiritual autobiography of the eighteenth century, *Narrative of His Conversion.* But the "Great Awakening" of religious fervor that Edwards helped foment among his fellow Puritans did not outlive him, nor did his memoir of religious conversion seem strongly to influence the personal narratives that followed his. Instead, the most important memoir of the eighteenth century is scarcely spiritual, but, rather, deeply pragmatic: *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1771–90; published 1793).

Franklin's autobiography not only outlived him by hundreds of

[7] A darker version of Rowlandson's narrative is the story of Hannah Duston, another woman captured by Indians in Haverhill, Massachusetts, in 1697. Duston retaliated for the death of her newborn by killing and scalping ten of her captors. Although she looks like a murderer in our enlightened days, she was revered in her own: Duston was the first woman in the United States to have a monument erected in her honor.

[8] Recounted in David Freeman Hawke, *Everyday Life in Early America* (New York, 1988).

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years, it provided the template of the American dream as it would continue to be imagined until midway through the twentieth century. The rags-to-riches tale of the self-made man [*sic*] which Franklin originated in his autobiography has become a staple of American literature, both in fiction and nonfiction. In fact, revealing the secret of his material success is the reason Franklin gives for writing this book at all.

> From the poverty and obscurity in which I was born and in which I passed my earliest years, I have raised myself to a state of affluence and some degree of celebrity in the world. As constant good fortune has accompanied me even to an advanced period of life, my posterity will perhaps be desirous of learning the means which I employed, and which, thanks to Providence, so well succeeded with me.

After giving his purpose for writing the autobiography, Franklin quickly presents his credentials as an American to the potential consumers of his text: he informs readers that he is "the youngest son of the youngest son for five generations back." A truism of America's founding fathers is that they were frequently the offspring of "younger" sons. The English laws of primogeniture were such that eldest sons inherited the family property in England, younger sons being thus induced to try their fortunes in the colonies. Franklin's father, a non-conformist in the Church of England, came to America in 1685 to escape religious persecution—another common credential for early Americans. Ben Franklin was therefore born in Boston, the fifteenth of Josiah Franklin's seventeen children and the youngest boy.

It's a wise father who knows his own child: Josiah Franklin soon perceived that his youngest son hated the family chandlery and, to prevent the spirited Ben from running off to sea (a serious temptation for Boston-bred boys with a taste for adventure), Josiah indentured him as an apprentice printer to James Franklin, his much older half brother. Again, the "younger son" mentality of young Benjamin brought his rebellious tendencies to the fore in this new relationship.

> Though a brother, [James] considered himself as my master and me as his apprentice, and accordingly expected the same services from me as he would from another, while I thought he degraded me too much in some he required from me, who from a brother expected more indulgence. . . . Perhaps this harsh and tyrannical treatment of

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> me might be a means of impressing me with the aversion to arbitrary power that has stuck to me through my whole life.

In addition to the depredations of his big brother, young Franklin had the English Assembly to deal with—he and James had been publishing anti-English editorials in their paper, the *New England Courant.* Between his brother's abuse and the ire of the English governors, Franklin soon decided to leave Boston and become a printer elsewhere in the colonies.

In October 1723, Franklin settled as a printer's assistant in Philadelphia. After a few years, he quarreled with his employer and set up his own shop. Again, in his recounting of these events, Franklin's narrative underscores the rebelliousness and urge for independence that would become the trademarks of American character.

After opening his own print shop, and soon becoming a wizard of industry and efficiency, Franklin did not neglect his own spiritual education. He read constantly and set himself daily tasks to improve both his mind and his character. The wisdom he attained, he gives to his readers in the *Autobiography*: "I grew convinced that *truth*, *sincerity*, and *integrity*, in dealings between man and man, were of the utmost importance to the felicity of life." This sounds like the motto of the Rotary Club of America. He goes further: "In order to secure my credit and character as a tradesman, I took care not only to be in *reality* industrious and frugal, but to avoid the appearances of the contrary. I dressed plain and was seen at no places of idle diversion." Scientist, inventor, linguist, lover, father, and ambassador, Franklin minted the archetype of a successful American. His autobiography even prescribes a list of thirteen moral virtues for self-betterment: temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity and humility.

In his autobiography, Franklin reveals himself as a man shaped by his times—the oppression by the English governors of the American colonies—and by his circumstances: born poor but bright, oppressed by his half brother and his less-talented employers. These two major external influences inculcated a desire in him for independence from tyranny. Franklin is the model of the self-made man—born in poverty, he achieved both riches and

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respect. He is the exemplar of what Thomas Jefferson claimed for American society (as opposed to European): a meritocracy based on talent and ability rather than birth and wealth.

Franklin had been dead for nearly half a century when Alexis de Tocqueville visited America in 1831–32. Many of nineteenth-century America's greatest writers were mere boys—Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville—and two others, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne, were still very young men, the majority of their accomplishments yet to come. De Tocqueville took his measure of the nation when its greatest achievements were political rather than literary. Thomas Jefferson had only died a few years before, and his and Franklin's eighteenth-century ideas about democracy had taken root and grown lushly into the nineteenth. Thus de Tocqueville, who had come to America to study the prison system, instead left with a consuming passion to write about democracy in America. His book with that title appeared in America in 1840, four years after Emerson published *Nature* and five before Thoreau would give up teaching to move to a cabin at Walden Pond and write his autobiography.

De Tocqueville's description of an American bookseller's shop in 1831, however, would still have been recognizable to readers a decade later:

> [A traveller] will first find a multitude of elementary treatises, destined to teach the rudiments of human knowledge. Most of these books are written in Europe; the Americans reprint them, adapting them to their own use. Next comes an enormous quantity of religious works, Bibles, sermons, edifying anecdotes, controversial divinity, and reports of charitable societies; lastly appears the long catalogue of political pamphlets. In America, parties do not write books to combat each other's opinions, but pamphlets, which are circulated for a day with incredible rapidity, and then expire.

Unsurprisingly, de Tocqueville found little to admire in American letters, which he deemed largely derivative ("the Americans constantly draw upon the treasures of English literature"). In fact, other than journalism, de Tocqueville concluded, "the inhabitants of the United States have then, at present, properly speaking, no literature." Without naming Franklin and Jefferson, he accurately notes that those who dabble in *belles-lettres* in democratic nations "are either engaged in politics or in a profession which only allows them to taste occasionally and by stealth the

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pleasures of the mind." Pleasures of the *book* would have been more precise in the cases of Jefferson and Franklin; certainly they tasted aplenty the pleasures of the mind. But it remains true that these two founding fathers might have been mainly men of letters had they been born in aristocratic Europe rather than in democratic America. Instead, they became leaders of their new republic; and when they picked up the pen to write for an audience, it was primarily to instruct and persuade rather than to entertain. Their aims were practical rather than aesthetic.

De Tocqueville, like every other commentator on the new republic before him (and many after him), believed that the necessity of conquering the wilderness had drained the poetic impulse out of Americans. He seems utterly to have missed the Transcendentalist movement budding around him when he observes:

> I readily admit that the Americans have no poets; I cannot allow that they have no poetic ideas. In Europe, people talk a great deal about the wilds of America, but the Americans themselves never think about them: they are insensible to the wonders of inanimate nature, and they may be said not to perceive the mighty forests which surround them till they fall beneath the hatchet. Their eyes are fixed upon another sight: the American people views its own march across these wilds,—drying swamps, turning the course of rivers, peopling solitudes, and subduing nature.

From his perspective in the early 1830s, de Tocqueville could not foresee the way the destruction of the American wilderness would profoundly alter the landscape of the nation's literature. He could not, properly speaking, have envisioned Thoreau.

Thoreau, however, was a prominent feature of the New England landscape, and far from a destructive one. He moved to Walden Pond in 1845, built his own house, grew his own food, and lived quietly and contentedly as a sojourner in Nature. He had no intention whatever of subduing nature, preferring to live in harmony with it. He has little good to say about industry, either in England or America, but finds much to praise in the Native American way of life. He is particularly drawn to a purification ritual practiced annually by the Mucclasse Indians: on one particular day of the year, they cleaned their houses, consigning all of their old goods to a bonfire, then fasted for three days. At the end of this time, they would feast and rejoice in their newly

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purified homes and bodies. Thoreau notes, "I have scarcely heard of a truer sacrament, that is, as the dictionary defines it, 'outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace,' than this. . . ."

Still, like other autobiographers of the nineteenth century, Thoreau remains more at the mercy of outside forces than inner desires. *Walden* could be subtitled "A Train Runs Through It," because the not-so-distant rumbling of train wheels on the newly-laid tracks does run through his narrative. Although he longs to turn inward, Thoreau is ever influenced by the world outside him: the woods, the pond, his bean field *and* his neighbors, his community (he was jailed for failing to pay his taxes), and the industrial culture burgeoning all around him.

In addition, Thoreau, like Franklin, wants to advise his readers. Much of *Walden*, though written in an "I" voice ("it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking"), is directed to a "you" audience. For all his seeming iconoclasm, Thoreau doesn't want simply to smash established practices; he wants to prescribe new ones. His advice to readers is vintage American:

> . . . I desire that there may be as many different people in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue *his own* way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead.

The main reason Thoreau stands out among nineteenth-century American autobiographers is because he opposed the destruction of the American wilderness, and did his best to preserve the small part with which he came in contact: ". . . I let it lie, fallow perchance, for a man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone." Alexis de Tocqueville, for all his perspicacity in describing America, could not imagine that the destruction of the wilderness would engender a spiritual and literary backlash, and that the "progress narrative" of America would be challenged by the spiritual ideology of the Transcendentalists.

Any discussion of nineteenth-century American autobiographies must include those that are the most irredeemably *American*: slave narratives. Scores of these memoirs have been republished since the 1960s, but the best remain *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, by Harriet Jacobs. Slave narratives invariably show the construction of a self

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in opposition to a suffocating external force: the oppression of the surrounding white culture. Jacobs writes:

> I had not lived fourteen years in slavery for nothing. I had felt, seen, and heard enough, to read the characters, and question the motives of those around me. The war of my life had begun; and though one of God's most powerless creatures, I resolved never to be conquered.

Far from being conquered by what she endured, Harriet Jacobs' identity was clearly forged in the furnace of that oppression.

This theme of the self created in spite of the attempts of the majority white culture to crush it distinguishes virtually every autobiography by an African American. It represents the self-defining experience for American blacks, and some description of it appears in nineteenth-century autobiographies by Douglass and Jacobs up through late-twentieth-century memoirs by Henry Louis Gates and Brent Staples. This passage from James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) is representative.

> I . . . contracted some dread, chronic disease, the unfailing symptom of which is a kind of blind fever, a pounding in the skull and fire in the bowels. . . . There is not a Negro alive who does not have this rage in his blood—one has the choice, merely, of living with it consciously or surrendering to it.

The autobiographies of Americans who identify themselves as members of minorities continue to follow this pattern, whether written a century ago or now.

Apart from these exceptions, a more general movement in this genre of literature—the impetus for self-construction shifting from external forces to inner—informs the historical trajectory of American autobiography. This general trend becomes strikingly obvious in the works of the last half of this century, but its seeds may initially have been sown in the most important American autobiography of the early 1900s: Henry Adams' *The Education of Henry Adams* (1905).

In this book, Adams discovers that the more he learns, the less he understands. His education has failed to clarify for this intellectual the workings of the modern world; instead, the more knowledge he acquires, the more baffling and complex it appears. Tellingly, Adams subtitled his autobiography, "Studies in Twenti-

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eth-Century Multiplicity." The passage below suggests the crux of his third-person narrative of himself.

> All one's life, one had struggled for unity, and unity had always won. The national government and the national unity had overcome every resistance, and the Darwinian evolutionists were triumphant over all the curates; yet the greater the unity and the momentum, the worse became the complexity and the friction. . . . the multiplicity of unity had steadily increased, was increasing, and threatened to increase beyond reason.

As this excerpt from Adams suggests, the path I have traced through American autobiography may stem from the increasing complexity of American society. When settlers first arrived here, they had a clear purpose—to hack a living space out of the forest, build houses and churches, erect a community. Their lives were brutal, but simple. Their identity derived more from who they were not—not European (any longer), not Indians, not animals—than who they were. They pitched their lives on the edge of the wilderness and spent their days clearing land, chopping wood, finding or planting food, having and raising children. They were too busy surviving to reflect long on the meaning of their existence but, if they were tempted to do so, they were Christians and could look in the Bible.

Well into the nineteenth century, Americans who had the intellect to reflect on the meaning of their lives were too pragmatic to linger long over the task. Jefferson and Franklin gave themselves to their communities; what they discovered about themselves, they applied to others. Both of these men were products of the Enlightenment and they firmly believed in the power of knowledge. Of course, they also lived in a time when knowledge itself was not yet so vast as to daunt the intelligent generalist. It was still possible to "know the world," and Franklin and Jefferson were *philosophes*—they believed any intelligent individual could master a great quantity of knowledge if he simply applied himself to the task. From their perspective in history, they could not have envisioned the objections to education—to knowledge itself—that Henry Adams would raise at the turn of the twentieth century.

Inevitably, certain types of knowledge led to the development of the technology that would revolutionize American life. In this

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country, as in the rest of the Western world, the single-family farm that conjoined both work and family and represented the occupation of most of the population has steadily disintegrated into a myriad of employments outside the home and away from the family. Most people nowadays work in "service industries" and have no tangible products to show for their labors. Many people find it difficult even to describe to their children what they spend their workdays doing.

Generalization has given way to specialization, knowledge has both exploded and fragmented. External events—such as the world wars of this century, the Holocaust, the invention of the nuclear bomb—have grown increasingly difficult to comprehend in both their magnitude and their implications. Knowledge no longer enlightens, but rather darkens our brows; knowledge now seems malevolent, as it was in the Garden of Eden. Progress no longer looks as good as it did in the earlier centuries of this country—it no longer even looks like progress.

The fragmentation evident everywhere in the larger society is echoed in the fragmentation of individual identity. Autobiographies refract the image of the broken self, but they don't create the phenomenon. Psychological studies show that depression has been steadily increasing since World War II, for a variety of possible reasons: the mobility of people in modern life, who remove themselves from the familial support system and long-term close friendships; the demands of the modern workplace; the complexity of the postwar world itself, with its advanced technology and changeability; the breakdown of the nuclear family; the rise in unemployment and the uncertain economy.[9]

For these reasons and others, individual identity has never been more fragile than it is now. The narcissism so prevalent in America has found its logical niche in the autobiography, but such memoirs do not glorify self-identity so much as question it. The narcissist stares at himself because he fears his image will disappear if he doesn't constantly monitor it. He isn't full of himself so much as hungry to catch a glimpse of who he really is.

American autobiography in the 1990s, then, records the rupture of both national and individual identity. Certainty about the

[9] Sonia G. Austrian, *Mental Disorders, Medications, and Clinical Social Work* (New York, 1995).

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world and one's place in it has given way to confusion—even one's senses can no longer be trusted to provide accurate information. We can be fooled and we are fooled all the time: we live in the era of virtual reality and this lends our lives a surreal quality. Contemporary American memoirists are simply encoding these doubts about the nature of reality and the instability of identity.

No one can predict what direction American autobiographies will take after this point, but we can see where we are now. To misquote Henry Adams, "All one's life, one had struggled for unity, and unity had finally been lost."

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HAROLD FROMM

Ecology and Ecstasy on Interstate 80

> Loth to believe what we so grieved to hear,
> For still we had hopes that pointed to the clouds,
> We questioned him again, and yet again;
> But every word that from the peasant's lips
> Came in reply, translated by our feelings,
> Ended in this,—*that we had crossed the Alps.*
> —Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, VI, ll 586-591

On March 28th, 1996, I packed up the car in preparation for a five-thousand-mile automobile trip to the Southwest and California that would take me away from home for at least three weeks. The plan was to visit Tucson, Los Angeles, Davis, and Reno to see a number of friends and family members as well as to explore a few potential warm spots to which I might move in order to escape once and for all the harshness of Chicagoland's winters. The drive would doubtless be bittersweet, a lonely solo unavoidably retraversing many places that my now dead wife, Gloria, and I had visited together—in our unflagging happiness—sometime around 1985. The final stop would be Reno, where a little book-signing party was to be sponsored by the University of Nevada's English department to celebrate the publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader*, the fruit of half a dozen years of rewarding editorial collaboration with Cheryll Glotfelty.

I packed up my still quite new, rather spiffy, Saturn SL-2 with more than enough provisions and equipment for meals in motel rooms, including a hot plate, cans of wholesome soups and chilies, coffee, oatmeal, low-fat cookies (and other necessities of a health nut's diet), utensils, gifts, clothes for various climates, and 24 compact disks loaded into two 12-disk magazines that could be inserted into the compact disk changer that I considered an essential option in the car's purchase. Some long and lonely days inevitably lay ahead.

The next morning I took off for Springfield, Missouri; then Amarillo, Texas; Las Cruces, New Mexico; and on the fourth day—after passing a moonscapish formation of rocks and boul-

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ders in southeastern Arizona—I eyed with slight nervousness the faint nimbus of orange sky that greeted my arrival at Tucson. My obsession with ecology had begun in the early seventies when Gloria and I (deceived by the benign direction of summer winds during househunting) were ignorant enough to have bought a little farm in northwest Indiana, captivatingly beautiful but also the most polluted place where I have ever dwelled in my life. In our dispiriting and futile effort to contend with the physical and mental symptoms caused by apocalyptic quantities of effluents from the steel mills of Gary, we quickly turned into hypersensitized canaries, acquiring a new awareness of even the most minuscule amounts of insalubrious air. Now, all my travels resembled the food tours of decadent gourmets, although in my case the ingestions derived not from eager tastings of the sophisticated concoctions of four-star restaurants but from involuntary inbreathings of complex toxic bouquets, the particular particulates and waste products of distinctive industrial outputs in cities and countrysides all over North America and Europe.

Tucson's air turned out to be still relatively salutary, although a far cry from its celebrated purity of yesteryear. But it was better than Chicago's and infinitely better than anything breathable around Los Angeles, so I felt Tucson offered a real possibility for relocation. After a few rewarding days exploring landscape and housing, I headed northwest on the I-10 to Phoenix, which proved a very different kettle of fish. Halfway there, though nothing obvious was to be seen around me, I began to experience a tightening up of the sinuses and throat—what people call "flu-like" symptoms—as well as the familiar signs of a pollution headache. (But in my years of experience the most toxic air pollution has tended to be partially or totally invisible.) Once into Phoenix, however, I began to feel well again under sunny blue skies. I now could see that the northeast wind was blowing a vast dark orange plume of smog to the south and west of the city, a plume whose outer edges I had probably briefly traversed en route from Tucson. This plume, broadening rapidly into a wider and wider triangle as it expanded from its source, accompanied me all the way to Blythe at the California border, a distance of roughly 175 miles. As it gradually dissipated into the California desert, I could begin to see, leaving Blythe, what I took to be the outer edges of pollution from Los Angeles, still about 225 miles to

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the west, extending welcoming arms to embrace me in a chokehold. The smog became increasingly intense as I got to Palm Springs, a polluted desert oasis, and as I approached Riverside, one of the most notoriously smoggy areas in the United States, the entire valley from Los Angeles eastward appeared enveloped in a cloud of toxins.

For a few days I settled with friends in Fullerton, near Disneyland, the same friends who had told me on each previous visit that in Fullerton they were "not bothered by smog," an ambiguous report I never could fathom. Did it mean that Fullerton itself was exempt from smog or that my friends recognized its presence but were never personally "bothered" by it? Whatever they intended, my days there were marked with virtually nonstop headaches and malaise, the skies were orange, and one of the friends who claimed not to be bothered fell into drowsy states several times a day that segued into brief catnaps. It struck me as more than a funny coincidence that these naps corresponded perfectly with my worst headaches and "flu-like" symptoms. And indeed, I myself had several bouts of pretty irresistible drowsiness during the week I spent in the greater Los Angeles area, even after some exceptionally good nights of sleep.

When my visit had ended, I headed north on Interstate 5, the Santa Ana Freeway in Los Angeles, which soon crosses the San Gabriel Mountains and makes its way up the San Joaquin Valley, the vegetable-growing capital of North America. The wind was from the south and the plume from Los Angeles was dispersed into a blurring haze throughout the valley, almost as far north as the imaginary line one could draw from Salinas to Fresno, about 225 miles from L.A. I vividly recalled stopping for gas on an earlier trip up this route with Gloria and my Fullerton friends, issuing my customary complaints about the shockingly bad air, complaints which often rub people the wrong way, impatient with what strikes them as sheer crackpotism—since *they* claim not to be "bothered." Here, perhaps 75 miles north of Los Angeles, the gas station attendant had completely surprised me by volunteering the information to my party that this polluted mess in the middle of nowhere was Los Angeles smog! I regarded him as a secret ally.

As I reached the Sacramento/Davis area, about 90 miles east of San Francisco, the skies looked good and I felt pretty okay. The winds were carrying Sacramento smog far to the north, beyond

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my projected route, a sharp contrast with my experience several years earlier when I flew to Sacramento from Chicago and was surprised to find the ground completely obliterated by orange smog as the plane circled in for a landing, a more representative picture, as I since have learned, of what happens to smaller cities as they grow into large ones.

So there it was. I had already covered about 3000 miles; and as I traversed the great open spaces of our heroic pioneering West, everywhere I looked were miles and miles of toxic air, the fruits of expansionism and technology, fruits that, in my mind, were making millions of people feel wretched every day (without their knowing why) and contributing to long-term, often fatal, diseases which one day would suddenly appear as if from nowhere to do them in. Electric power plants, oil refineries, steel mills, millions of automobiles, dry-cleaning plants, suburban lawnmowers, jet skis, snowmobiles, sport-utility vehicles, copper smelters—you name it. Meanwhile, trees that produce oxygen were being cut down to produce Big Macs, methane gas from cattle, and pollution from animal wastes; water was being fouled by paper mills and oil spills; fish killed by pesticide runoff—you know the story: the nightmare of technology, the inheritance of the Industrial Revolution. "Abundance makes me poor," as one of Ovid's wiseacres would have it. To suppose technology is not among contemporary society's chief critical problems would be to live in a fool's paradise, to be permanently out to lunch.

After spending two days with my friends in Davis I was concerned to leave early enough to arrive in Reno before dark, perhaps a two-hour drive now that the speed limits have been raised to 70 or 75 mph. I said goodbye, hopped into the Saturn, turned on the compact disk player—my salvation—and sped off into the not-yet sunset. Davis and Sacramento are flat, flat, flat, but the Sierras' foothills were not far to seek and within an hour I could see the road starting to climb. I was already feeling a little inebriate, having just heard Beethoven's *Fantasy for Piano, Chorus, and Orchestra,* that curious melange of styles and themes that eventuated in the "Ode to Joy," rapturous when done by the right conductor but a flop in less capable hands. My spirit was soaring as the road reached higher and the air thinned out, the rich vegetation of the western side of the Sierras took on the intense green of a late afternoon in mid-April, and the curves were

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getting sharper. Like Dr. Johnson in his primitive horse-drawn coach en route from London to Edinburgh, I felt there was nothing more exciting than racing along a highway at top speed. Sweeping through woods edged by sudden declivities with panoramic mountain views that a solo driver dare not examine too minutely, I was a little surprised to hear the opening orchestral chords and shouted "kyries" of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, which for the moment I forgot I had loaded into the CD player's magazine. This was the great performance by Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic, recorded in 1960, certainly one of the best on records, issued first on LP's and now (along with the aforementioned *Fantasy*) digitally remastered on SONY compact disks, more clearly audible than ever before. The *Missa Solemnis*, one of the dozen or so most sublime musical creations of Western culture, sounding even today grotesquely cacophonous in its Dionysiac syncopated frenzy, requires—like the symphonies of Bruckner—the most skillful of conductors to hold it together, or else it can simply fall apart into a series of disconnected and stumbling episodes. Caught in its mania, I was driving faster and faster, struggling to negotiate the curves and forced over and over again to slam on the brakes to avoid going off the edge. Monumental vistas were unfolding, my excitement level kept rising, all my senses were being stimulated at once. I was reaching 7000 feet, I had just passed the stunning sights of Emigrant's Gap—when the most stupendous moments of the entire *Missa* commenced—the high-speed fugue on "*et vitam venturi*" in the Credo, insanely executed by Bernstein and his chorus about twice as fast as the speed of my car, music that at mere ground level always left me in a heap, a pulp, a burned-out shell of a person. Now, at high speed and high altitude, I reached a pitch of excitement almost hysterical. I was traversing Donner Pass, skirting Donner Lake, trying to take in this incredible panorama of sights from the world and sounds from the car, thinking inevitably of the tragically fated Donner party, half of whom perished right there over a hundred years ago when California was little more than a string of Spanish missions founded yet another hundred years earlier by Father Junípero Serra. The strain (to borrow from Donne) on that "subtile knot" that joins spirit and flesh reached the breaking point as the fugue drew to its frenetic close, and I burst into tears of sensory overload while pressing

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down on the brake-pedal to keep my car from swerving off the road. The slant of light from the late afternoon sun was still painterly, coloring the multilayered geological cuts through which the roadway was passing and sharpening the relief of trees against mountainsides, of roadcurves against mountain passes.

It was at that precise ecstatic moment I experienced my ecological epiphany. Though it didn't come from God, John Muir's Sierran hosannas to what he called divinity and what Shelley more aptly called "the intense inane" were never far from my mind. It derived, rather transparently, from easily identifiable components of some of the most major intuitions and experiences of my reflective life, but now, like the treescape's sun-illuminated relief, my ordinary horizontal thinking had been shot through by a vertical bolt of lightning-insight, casting the mundane into the sublime by making it possible to think a host of thoughts simultaneously.

And exactly what did the mountains have to say?

Put somewhat baldly: "Everything human is technology!" Perhaps one would prefer to say not *everything*, but almost everything. The spiffy car I was driving, with its air bags and antilock brakes. The compact disk player, the disk with the *Missa*, the analog tapes from 1960, the recording process itself, the original performance with all of the manufactured instruments and trained voices, the system of producing and distributing the disks, Bernstein's jet-setting existence and materialities, Beethoven's own life, his music paper, his pens, his piano, the musical "logic" that enables composition. As for his deafness, more advanced technology might have alleviated it, changing everything. Then there was the roadway on which I was driving, the incredible engineering feats that cut through the mountain passes, and the geological layers thereby revealed (illuminatingly examined by John McPhee in *Assembling California*). The mountain views were themselves the fruits of technology—of decisions where to put the road and the angles of vision that resulted, of the appearance of the layered roadcuts and their contribution to the aesthetic experience. Mostly everything about me and my life had a technological connection as well: the clothes I wore, the computer I used every day, the manufactured food I ate, my shaving equipment, electric toothbrush, my wristwatch, the crowns in my teeth, my glasses, orthopedic shoes. Maybe Donna Haraway was right: we're already

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cyborgs, half organism, half prostheses; half Nature, half technology. Surely the uplift I felt at this landscape required a healthy body, good food, bourgeois nurturing and education, modern equipment and appliances—all from technologies. Indeed, that I had survived childhood to become a physically fit adult after several potentially fatal diseases was due in large measure to the biotechnologies of medicine. From the first stone tools of Paleolithic peoples to the latest modem access to the World Wide Web, from the poisoned Roman populace who drank water in leaded cups to the irradiated corpses from Chernobyl—the good and the bad of human life were mostly technology. Technophobes may praise the Amish for their simplicity, but what distinguishes the Amish derives not from eschewing technology but from fixation upon one of its earlier stages. Why should any particular phase of technology—or of evolution, for that matter—be thought of as more "natural" than any other? Are animals bred by humans to pull wagons more "natural" than machines designed to do the same thing? Without technology—the payoff from opposable thumbs—human beings would never have been able to lift themselves out of primal animal existence. Even the most nature-committed postmodern adventurers are completely dependent on the latest inventions. Edward Abbey, for all his chest-thumping bravado in *Desert Solitaire*, was not as solitarily self-creating as he liked to make out. Floating down the Colorado River in his inflatable raft stocked with tinned and dehydrated foods or roughing it in Havasu with telephone-ordered provisions mailed from the grocery store at the Grand Canyon, he was as much a child of technology as the bourgeois tourists he satirized in the recollections of his ranger days at Arches National Park. Today's wall climbers and backpackers would hardly exist without L.L. Bean, Gore-Tex, Rockport, water purifiers, camping stoves—and their four-wheel-drive gas-guzzlers. The sciences of ecology are themselves enabled by devices to measure pollutants in air and water, pesticides in vegetables, radiation from failed power plants. The air pollution in New York, Chicago, northwest Indiana, Phoenix, and Los Angeles may have tainted my life with an ongoing malaise, but my epiphany on I-80 made it plain that the bad and good were so inextricably tied together that to be against technology was to be against human life itself. I thought of the absurdity of Max Oelschlaeger's nostalgia for hunter-gatherers in

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The Idea of Wilderness as the decadence of a technologically pampered bourgeois philosophy professor. The war of the well-feds against technology looked less like Ludditism than like the religious and political cults of Jonestown, Waco, and Oklahoma City.

Indeed, the "ecocentrism" and "biocentrism" of the deep ecologists has an alarming resemblance to the right-wing power ploys of misanthropes like Phyllis Schlafly and Pat Robertson. If the reactionary right can be said to fear and hate adult consciousness and to love only what they can safely ventriloquize and control without back-talk—namely God and fetuses, creatures that express the fantasies of their ventriloquist-creators—then the deep-ecological left can be said to constitute their mirror image, with the Unabomber their basket-case *doppelgänger.* If the religious right spouts self-regarding, repressive, and maudlin essentialisms about the will of God, about the *real* nature of men and women, sex, marriage, and family life, the deep-ecological left essentializes transient stages of evolution and speaks of ecosystems, natural habitats, wilderness, animals, and "nature" as though they were Platonic ideas, fixed for all time instead of evolving aspects of a universe without stasis, an evolution no less "natural" after the Industrial Revolution than before. In an evolutionary universe, things adapt or perish, so Nature is anything survivable, not just the familiar species that happen to have populated recent centuries or our own more recent childhoods to provide deep ecologists with "eternal" Platonic forms. Instead of mendacities about "the will of God" and human normalities, the deep ecologists have their own mendacities about "speaking for the Other," for trees and wildlife and mountains, just one more disingenuous stratagem of the will to power. Their counterpart to God's will is the notion of "intrinsic value," which replaces the narcissistic humility of religious extremists with denunciations of anthropocentrism for its "instrumentalism," a relationship to the natural world—it is claimed—that fails to recognize the intrinsic value of other species. "Intrinsic value," however, is itself an instrumental oxymoron. Its purpose is to foreclose conversation, like references to God, and to establish the "innocence" (i.e., reverence for life) of biocentrists vis-à-vis the selfish predatoriness of anthropocentrists. But nobody is innocent. *To be alive is to be a murderer!* Recycling is the Master Algorithm of the universe. The

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only authentic biocentric act is suicide, freeing up finite matter for the benefit of others. Everything is instrumental except survival of oneself. Inasmuch as all value is conferred by a reflective consciousness, nothing has *intrinsic* value except a reflective consciousness reflecting upon its own incarnation. When Dave Foreman tells us that grizzlies are more "important" than people or when Phyllis Schlafly tells us that atomic bombs are the gifts of a wise God (to keep down non-Western, non-WASP adults so North American fetuses can be turned into religious conservatives) we learn nothing about either intrinsic values or God's will, only the bad news we already knew: that Foreman and Schlafly are misanthropic powermongers for whom "nature" and "God" are not-so-secret agents of desire.

The master motive for human beings was always human survival and its attendant human interests. Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic and his role as a father figure of biocentrism were necessary and heroic developments after the destructive technologies of World War II, when a new awareness of suicidal human depredation (the result of shortsightedness and ignorance about what makes for survival) was desperately needed. But fifty years later, Leopold's biocentric commandments have become pious clichés for undergraduate term papers and for political reappropriation by the bourgeois anti-bourgeois left. Whereas Leopold could speak pioneeringly in the war-shattered forties about "reappraising things unnatural, tame, and confined in terms of things natural, wild, and free," in the late nineties these words function merely as invidious political terms, however benign their original intent—or as poetry. As ontological concepts, "natural," "wild," and "free" now seem almost meaningless, if not preposterous. Today, biocentrism and "intrinsic value" can be seen simply as other forms of human interests, as "anthropocentric" as the rest, no more disinterested than acts performed "for the greater glory of God." Even in the case of Leopold, biocentrism was offered as an enhancement of human life (both practical and aesthetic), since human life depends on a particular ecological mix that war and unbridled capitalist/communist technology have threatened to destroy. From a human perspective (and what other do we have?), the wilderness (a recent invention) and grizzlies (a recent obsession) aren't being preserved "for their own sake," but because certain people like them, need them, or regard them as

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necessary for a better sort of human life. If "existing for their own sake" were the real criterion of "intrinsic value," then cockroaches and cancer would be as entitled to exist as anything else. If wolves can be reintroduced into Yellowstone ("for the ecosystem"), why not smallpox into the Western world?

As I moved at high speed through the wondrous Sierras while the sun declined in the late afternoon sky, my electrifying sense of the primacy of technology—ever in need of control—and the ineluctability of anthropocentrism—which does not always recognize its own survival interests—was intensified by recollection of the passage from *The Prelude* that I have quoted above. What so shocked Wordsworth and his party, psyched up as they were by the notion of traversing mountains that had seemed dauntingly majestic from a distance, was to learn that they had already crossed the Alps! In Wordsworth such a realization inevitably leads to a passage extolling the wonder and power of the human imagination, a faculty that half creates what it beholds (and, one might add, that makes Nature in its own image, just as it has always done with God). But I thought too of John Muir's seemingly ecocentric hosannas in these very Sierras: "every crystal, every flower a window opening into heaven, a mirror reflecting the Creator," a passage (one among many) so different from Wordsworth's yet finally as anthropocentric as his. Wordsworth's was an unabashed celebration of human faculties even greater than the Alps; Muir's, an erotic ecstasy that figured itself in the orgasmic language of hallelujahs—for nothing is quite so human-centered as imagining a universe made for our delight by a deity that has given his all.

My own epiphany was like Wordsworth's, only more so. These wondrously beautiful "Sierras" (which here can stand in for all of "nature") had no real existence of their own. There may indeed be Sierras underlying *my* "Sierras," but as philosophers from Thales to Rorty have made apparent over two millennia, we know very little about them and most of what we do know comes from the natural sciences. We live in a world of perceptions and appearances and, for us, appearance is reality. When I read his great book, *My First Summer in the Sierra,* I could not help picturing Muir amidst the mountains as a dust mite stumbling along inside a rich piece of velvet. Caught deep within the individual strands of pile that make velvet look and feel smooth to

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a comparatively gigantic human observer, the dust mite doubtless sings hosannas to the grandeur and mystery of each rough and monumental peak, clearly the product of some sublime and powerful deity. When human beings leave their "Scenic Vista" highway-lookouts miles away from velvety mountainside forests and wander closer in, to inspect the rugged mountain trees from inside, are they not like dust mites in velvet, scrounging around in the undergrowth of giant conifers? And when human beings behold the Sierras from a jumbo jet at 42,000 feet, are the dune-like undulations seen from above any the less "real" than the majestic peaks seen from below? And what do astronauts think, hundreds of miles above the earth, the Sierras now flattened into a splotch of color? Why sing paeans to majestic Sierras at all, any more than to strands of velvet pile, if the majestic Sierran peaks are no more "real" than (or just as "real" as) the flattened blotches from outer space? Velvet pile is as awesome as Sierras if you happen to be a dust mite. Sierras are as innocuous as velvet pile if you happen to be an astronaut. Why privilege the ground-level perceptions of a particular species (i.e., us) as representations of the *real* reality? We squash out creations as sensational as Sierras with every step we take: not being small enough to appreciate their microscopic majesty, we fail to sing songs of reverence to mitochondria or particles of clay. Selective attributions of deity are the very essence of anthropocentrism. Assessed from the totality of possible viewpoints, everything would be equally sublime or mundane. Is the world really a spectacular show designed for humanfolk, staged by a cosmic Ted Turner, biggest cable operator in the universe, who stays awake at night worrying about the fall of sparrows and other violence and sex aired daily on his infinite channels?

"Nature," like everything else a contested site (as they now say), is the technological production of our bodies and minds, a *super*natural naturalism. Whatever it may be in itself, its "intrinsic value" is "manmade" for human ends and its "beauty" a function of our sensory apparatus. Protecting "nature" is in our own best interests, unless we are ecocentric enough to bequeath "our" world to the next generation of mutants, perhaps irradiated survivors of Chernobyl (who might thrive on pollution and nuclear wastes) or animals bizarrely transformed by gene therapy run amok.

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As I reached the eastern side of the Sierras, everything changed. The lush green mountainsides had now become the dry and sere landscape of the high desert. Off in the distance, like a New Atlantis, glowed the high-rise casinos of Reno, suffused with an orange halo from the buildings' nighttime illumination systems. Another feat of techno-magic.

I spent a few days in Reno and Sparks with my friends, then moved on to Salt Lake City, whose Wasatch Mountains provide what is perhaps the most awesome stretch on all of I-80, though again the placement of the city and the cut of the road contribute a very humanized aspect to the spectacle, like a Turner painting. If the ill-fated Donner party could be said to have suffered from a *lack* of technology, doomed as they were by slow locomotion, lack of electronic communications, inadequate maps and weather information, low-tech food storage and preservation, absence of railroads and cities, insufficient ways of keeping warm, then my own near-catastrophic hour in a terrifying whiteout episode at seven thousand feet in the Rockies outside Laramie was the result of advanced technology that was not quite advanced enough. When violent winds began to blow the snow from the mountaintops almost horizontally across the highway, the marvelous roads became virtually invisible and treacherously icy; my high-tech car was comfortable and warm in the twenty-degree April air, but direly in need of X-ray vision or radar. On the side of the road was a disabled juggernaut, a cross-country semitrailer, now overturned from excessively daredevil driving. The other cars I could barely see despite their generally ample lights. All the normally enabling technologies made it possible for me to zoom into incredible danger with the insouciance and intrepidity that technology so often breeds. (The failures of modern technology have been cruelly charted by David Ehrenfeld in *The Arrogance of Humanism.*) With parched mouth and pounding heart, I was nearly rear-ended by another semitrailer that barrelled out of the curtain of snow into my rearview mirror as I crawled along at 25 mph., managing to swerve aside at the last possible second. Then suddenly, as though turned off by a switch, the whiteout lifted and I found myself in crisp bright sunlight. Next day, approaching Lincoln, Nebraska, with winds again howling but sun shining brightly, I was confronted by another sort of techno-misadventure, this time a blinding dust storm that probably

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covered hundreds of square miles, the result of recently plowed fields and drought-like conditions—fortunately not very serious compared to the adventure of the day before. For me the prognosis was plain: not a return to hunting and gathering—a never-never land of innocence and stasis—but a more and more refined technology. Technology was a metaphor for evolving human life, with consciousness as its blueprint. It was no more reversible than consciousness itself.

After a night outside Omaha, I was returned to bliss once more: as my estimable radio's scanner sampled every AM/FM broadcast receivable along I-80 in Iowa, I soon discovered the excellent station operated by Iowa State University, audible across most of the southern part of the state. I decided to give the CD player, which had provided exemplary service, a much-earned rest. It was late Saturday morning and the Metropolitan Opera was about to broadcast *Die Walküre*, conducted by James Levine, my favorite part of *The Ring*. With Bruno Walter, Lotte Lehmann, and Lauritz Melchior necessarily delivering a shadow performance deep inside my head and heart, I was moved nonetheless by the power of Levine's introductory thunderstorm and I was knocked quite flat by the heldentenor virtuosity of Plácido Domingo as Siegmund. As I reached the Quad Cities area and began the crossing of the Mighty Mississippi—with due regard for the river-defining technologies of Mark Twain, T.S. Eliot, and the Army Corps of Engineers—signs of spring were definitely in evidence, buds were opening, the air was warming, and Sieglinde was singing the most rapturous passage in all of *The Ring*: "*Du bist der Lenz / nach dem ich verlangte / in frostigen Winters Frist.*" As tears of ecstasy again began to flow from the easily unravelled strands of my subtile knot, like Molly Bloom saying "Yes" I experienced a powerful moment of assent to a newfound identity: fighting postmodernism all the way, I had nevertheless to acknowledge that I was indeed, after all . . . *a cyborg*! Take away technology, I realized, and I would cease to exist. From my daily traveler's lunch of frozen yogurt spurted forth from machines at McDonald's to my Visa card swiped through roadside gas pumps, I began to review the adventures of the previous three weeks. And while I can't provide a summation as resoundingly scriptural as Eliot's "What the Thunder Said," I think I can venture a little homily called "What the Car Stereo Said."

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To a greater or lesser degree, I therefore affirm, everything human is technological. Everything human is anthropocentric as well. "Ecocentric Appreciation of Nature" may have a disinterested honorific air (like "for the greater glory of God"), but if the "nature" that we "appreciate," like Wordsworth's Alps, is largely produced by our psycho-biological constitutions (Wordsworth called it "Imagination"), then appreciation of nature (and everything else) is an essentially anthropocentric subjectivity. Because, if *we* ceased to exist, the "majestic Sierras" would cease along with us. *Something*, presumably, would remain (e.g., the universe dealt with by the physical sciences), but it would be neither peaks nor blobs, neither majestic nor "serrated," all requiring a sensibility and a "point of view." From the point of view of the universe (which has no point of view), to name it is to misname it, because the act of naming makes it what it is *only for us.* Without Nature, no humans; but without humans, no "nature." If this is true, then what can it mean to be "ecocentric"? The motto of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) reads, "When humans study nature, it is nature studying itself." But it might just as well read, "When humans study nature, it is humans studying themselves."

As I pressed into Illinois, now only a few hours from home, Act One was drawing to its close: Plácido Domingo, in the guise of Siegmund, shouted his "*Siegmund heiss' ich / und Siegmund bin ich!*"—a feat of the most glorious vocal technology. He pulled his sword out of the tree with that unbearably potent cry of "*Nothung! Nothung!*" leaving multitudes of technologically equipped people all over the world gasping at their stereos in Wagnerian delirium. Sieglinde, as my libretto so finely puts it, "throws herself passionately on his breast" while "he draws her to him with passionate fervor." To worldwide gooseflesh, the orchestra played its wild and frenetic coda while the lovers embraced. As the curtain fell at the Metropolitan and the audience went berserk almost a thousand miles to the east, I thought of the way in which everything suddenly falls into place at the end of *To the Lighthouse*—and I felt that I too had had my vision.

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DANA GIOIA

Learning from Robert Fitzgerald

I

Early one afternoon in September 1976, I was walking through the New Haven train station, trying to catch the Amtrak express to Boston. The weather was suffocatingly muggy, a gray Northeastern day when the sun is invisible but oppressive and the morning drizzle steams from the tarmac. For two hours the public address system had slurred assurances to the platform that the train would arrive in fifteen minutes. Finally I had wandered back to the terminal to fetch a cup of what I had seen advertised as "the world's finest coffee." Now with my lukewarm, watery purchase in hand, I returned through a sooty tunnel to my gate. The walls of this underworld were festive with defaced soft drink posters and lyric graffiti hastily spray-painted in what look liked Arabic. Although I walked alone through the subterranean gallery, the memory of other travelers greeted me in the delicate blend of urines that filled the damp air.

Climbing the concrete stairs to the gate, I tried to cheer myself by thinking of the friends I would visit on this last-minute trip to Boston. I had reached everyone except the person I wanted most to see, Robert Fitzgerald, who had two years earlier been my favorite teacher at Harvard. I had not seen him since leaving graduate school to pursue a career in business. I wanted very much to talk to him about the difficulties I was facing trying to write poetry while working in a large corporation. He would have practical advice, I knew, since as a young man, he too had pursued his literary interests outside the academy. Knowing I would miss him now in Boston, I wondered when, if ever, I would see him again.

Immersed in glum thoughts, moist with perspiration and self-pity, I rose from the redolent stairwell into the bright haze of the platform. Just as I turned to rejoin my fellow refugees, who

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stood dour and defeated at the far end, I heard footsteps echoing behind me from the underpass. Glancing down, I saw an older man climbing toward me from the shadows. Dressed despite the heat in a tweed jacket and navy blue beret, he seemed familiar, but I knew from experience how easy it was, alone in a new city, to mistake a stranger for some old friend. Then I noticed the dark-green Harvard book bag slung over his shoulder. As I stood staring, the apparition stopped to address me.

"Mr. Gioia," it said in the conspiratorial whisper I knew so well. "Who would have expected you?"

"Or you? Mr. Fitzgerald," I replied with the mock formality we always assumed on greeting one another.

We shook hands and walked down the platform together. A few minutes later, without announcement, the train arrived.

"Right on time," Robert said.

I realized he thought this was the three o'clock train whereas I knew it was the one o'clock express, two hours late. We had been trying to catch different trains. Now boarding the same one together, we spent the next two hours having the conversation I had hoped for.

Meetings with Robert were like that. They didn't just happen. They unfolded unexpectedly like sheer good luck. Sometimes the pure coincidence of the encounter was the amazing thing—like that tropic afternoon in New Haven. In the years that followed I bumped into Robert by accident in enough unlikely places—from a windswept Avenue of the Americas to a sunny Vassar quad—to make me believe in a Homeric notion of fate. But usually the good fortune was simply the irresistible warmth of his company. I never met anyone who knew him—colleague, student, or competitor—who did not like him. Affection, however, was only part of it. Everyone who knew Robert well felt he was special, not only in himself but in the qualities he brought out in those around him. Such generous unanimity is rare enough this side of paradise, especially in literary circles where personalities so often clash and one finds no shortage of jealousy. What made this consensus truly unusual was that none of his otherwise articulate admirers, most of them writers, could explain exactly what made Robert so uniquely appealing.

Conversations about Robert with his friends often came around to that same question, and even intimates like William Maxwell,

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who knew him for half a century, ultimately declared the answer ineffable. There was his sprightly intelligence, but it wasn't just that. Neither was it his swift, understated humor nor his native gentleness and humility. There was something else—impossible to describe—hidden at the core of his personality that kept the visible gifts in perfect accord, for it was that harmony that made Robert so special. I have seen many conspicuously gifted people in literary and business life—individuals of awesome intellect, boundless energy, enviable intuition—but usually the stronger the faculty the more it overpowers the rest of the personality. One hears in their presence a sort of psychic dissonance. Somehow Robert's many strengths harmonized so naturally that one simply wanted to sit back and enjoy the music of his company. Being with him, I understood for the first time how spiritual pilgrims recognized their next master. A few people truly do possess an aura, a tangible sense of their integrity which draws one in.

II

Good fortune also played a role in how I came to know Robert, because luck, more than careful planning, led me to take two courses with him in the same fall term of 1974. An unfashionable interest in prosody prompted me to enroll in "English 283: The History of English Versification," taught by a Mr. Robert Fitzgerald, a name I recognized then only as the author of a Homeric translation I had not read. Meanwhile the need to work up my Latin for the spring language exams pushed me into an advanced course on Roman poetry whose first session proved so intimidating that I fell by default (*o felix culpa*) into the less demanding "Comparative Literature 201: Studies in Narrative Poetry," taught by the same Mr. Fitzgerald. The seminar examined the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, and the *Inferno* with the requirement that students be able to read at least two of the poems in the original. Utterly Greekless, I had just enough Latin and Italian to qualify, and had already plowed dutifully through the first six books of the *Aeneid* twice in my old-fashioned Catholic high school. Comp. Lit. 201, I hoped, would be a good refresher course. It was, in retrospect, the course at Harvard that best fulfilled my grandiose fantasies of what an Ivy League seminar should be.

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So daunting had the language requirement proven that only four students presented themselves on the first day in the spacious seminar room in Boylston Hall—three brilliant linguists and me. Mr. Fitzgerald, as we called him according to Harvard protocol (he did not become Robert until two years later), sat waiting for us at the head of the table. Dressed in a pinstriped suit, monogrammed shirt, and dark tie, incongruously he carried a Harvard Co-op book bag, which made him look rather like a banker who had grabbed his son's school satchel by mistake. Smoking a cigarette as he watched us settle in, he seemed elegant but unaffected. He then began quizzing us on our command of Greek, Latin, and Italian. Which did we know? How long had we studied each one? What authors had we read in the original? Which translations had we used? He listened carefully to our nervous, inadequate replies.

"Ah," he said at length, "then the ancient languages are not yet entirely forgotten." Turning to the blackboard, he wrote two Latin lines from Horace, and asked, "Shall we begin?"

We met twice a week each time for two hours of relaxed but learned conversation. Halfway through each session the door would open quietly, and the capable Bette Anne Farmer, the Comp. Lit. secretary, would enter carrying a china tea service on a silver tray (which seemed an exotically luxurious touch of civility to a working-class Californian like me). Sipping our tea and listening to Fitzgerald discuss the special quality found in a particular line of hexameter, we experienced a combination of intelligence and humanity, scholarship and creativity for which our previous graduate work had left us unprepared.

No Greek mariners ever succumbed more quickly to a Siren's song than we to Fitzgerald's tutelage. To our public unease but private delight, he treated us as equals. (When asked to sign a student's copy of the *Odyssey*, he inscribed, "For——, fellow student of Homer.") He was not voluble. He rarely dominated the discussions he encouraged. But when he talked, we listened intently. Fitzgerald spoke slowly in a voice so intimate it seemed almost a whisper. Instinctively, we leaned forward to catch each word, our anticipation being heightened by his habit of pausing slightly between phrases, sometimes even taking a small pull of his cigarette as he formulated his exact words. In another teacher this mannerism might have become bothersome, but with Fitzgerald

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these momentary punctuations underscored his perfect timing and hooked the listener onto the line of his thought. Even his dismissals were exact and decorous. Disagreeing with Denys Page's assertion that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were written by different poets, Fitzgerald prefaced his detailed classroom rebuttal by saying gently, "Professor Page knew more Greek at eleven than I shall *ever* learn, but here his hubris has undone him." Listening to each beautifully shaped and skillfully paced sentence, we recognized a man who esteemed words. He exercised the same attention to his seminar conversation that he lavished on each line of poetry we studied.

Saying that Fitzgerald would linger over a particular line does not misrepresent his fastidious teaching style, which always focused on specifics. He combined the classicist's devotion to unraveling, word by word, the meaning of a passage with a poet's delight in how those words work together to create a memorable effect. He began almost every class with a line or two, some moment from the poem under discussion. It was almost inevitably some narrative detail or simile we might have overlooked. By working through the passage carefully in the original, he showed us how it mirrored some important aspect of the whole. Once, for example, he singled out the line in which Virgil described the serpents who rise from the sea to kill Laocoön and his sons:

Sibila lambebant linguis vibrantibus ora.

(They licked with quivering tongues their hissing mouths.)

After discussing the line as an example of Virgil's suggestive onomatopoeia, he also showed how it illustrated the secret of the Latin poet's characteristic music, which came from dramatic twists of word order. Here the first word of the line, the adjective "*sibila*" ("hissing") modified the final word, the noun "*ora*" ("mouths"). By bracketing the line with these syntactic partners, Virgil adds a subtle grammatical suspense to the more obvious narrative excitement of the description.

The risk in concentrating so much on textual detail is that the discrete observations never coalesce into a larger view. Fitzgerald quietly circumvented this danger with a skill that seemed effortless at the time. In retrospect, however, his apparently casual

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approach certainly involved both careful planning and a clear vision of how he wanted us to experience the interdependency of the three poems. What seemed like an offhand comment made one day would be picked up a few classes later with a surprising twist. A line from Homer he had asked us to pause over for its music would suddenly appear weeks later in a speech by Aeneas. A Virgilian simile he used to illustrate a strategy of Roman rhetoric would emerge almost word for word in Dante. Once, for example, he discussed an uncharacteristically epigrammatic sentence from Aeneas' speech at the fall of Troy praising its masterfully ironic use of repetition. This way of balancing a line, Fitzgerald suggested, had influenced Ovid and other poets:

Una salus victis nullam sperare salutem.

(The one safety for the vanquished is to expect no safety.)

Such pithy, end-stopped lines are rare in Virgil, and at the time this observation seemed only an interesting footnote. But when we began studying Dante, Fitzgerald started pointing out line after line that operated with similar turns. Here, for example, is the description of the Harpies attacking the souls of Suicides in Canto XIII of the *Inferno*:

Fanno dolore, ed al dolor finestra.

(They give pain and give to pain an outlet.)

These connections are the commonplaces of philology. Usually one registers them intellectually without letting them change one's sense of the poem. By allowing us to share in the discovery, however, Fitzgerald helped us understand how poets learn even the most specific tricks of language from their predecessors.

There was no battle between the ancients and the moderns in our class. If Fitzgerald traced the historical sources of these classic texts, he never let us forget their subsequent influence. They remained living poems, and he demonstrated their vitality by considering them from unusual perspectives. He analyzed the rhythm in Virgil's description of Neptune riding his chariot with reference to Gerard Manley Hopkins. Likewise he claimed Virgil's

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powerful representation of the Trojan ships under sail, "*spumas salis aere ruebant*" (which Fitzgerald later recreated as "they plowed the whitecapped seas / with stems of cutting bronze"), illustrated Robert Graves's theory that a poet's craft comes largely from knowing how to use the letter "s." One day he asked us to read Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition," a provocative assignment for a class in the epic since the essay maintains that a long poem is a contradiction in terms. Poe famously posits that no poem can be successfully sustained for more than about 120 lines. When asked in the next session what Poe's theory had to do with Dante, Fitzgerald replied with a question of his own. Had any of us ever counted the average number of lines in a canto of the *Commedia*? We quickly began counting and, of course, the average runs not much over 120 lines.

III

If Fitzgerald believed in teaching details, he also expected us to remember them. He required us, for example, to learn every character in each poem. This assignment did not include only the major figures but every soldier, shepherd, sailor, slave or shade who appeared, even momentarily, from Aietes and Eurymedousa to Medon and Tehoklymenus—hundreds of characters in all. Though we complained at the time (as some of my classmates also did about the many passages he made us memorize), in retrospect, this demand was a clever tactic to teach epic poetry. There is a temptation to read verse narrative as quickly and carelessly as prose. But narrative poetry is more compressed than prose fiction, and details bear more weight. Fitzgerald slowed down our reading not only by compelling us to take careful notes but also by forcing us to differentiate characters like Ktesippos, Agelaos, Amphimedon, Antinoos, and Eurymakhos from one another—figures we would otherwise have lumped together indiscriminately as Penelope's suitors. Fitzgerald believed that a great poet never introduced a character without good reason. Our duty was to discover and remember how each figure fit into the whole. No literature teacher had ever asked us to do a task simultaneously so simple and so comprehensive.

But then none of us had ever had a teacher who placed such

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paramount importance on the narrative line. My literary education had trained me to consider plotting an obvious and superficial device unworthy of serious attention. Plots were what the unenlightened looked for in literary texts. One soon learned at college that showing too great an enthusiasm in the classroom for the story line of a novel or long poem bordered on bad taste. Structure, symbolism, stylistics, subtext—those were the proper subjects of criticism. Now I watched in bewilderment as our instructor, Harvard's Boylston Professor of Rhetoric, spent part of each session discussing nuances of plot with the same obvious care and delight with which he quoted the choicest lines of Greek and Latin verse.

The surface of the poem, Fitzgerald's method implied, *was* the poem. No epic survived the welter of history unless both its language and story were unforgettable. From a plot posterity demands both immediate pleasure and enduring moral significance. An epic narrative must vividly and unforgettably embody the central values of a civilization—be they military valor or spiritual redemption. Only a few poets at a few fortunate points in history had met this challenge successfully. To understand these poems, Fitzgerald insisted, one not only needed to study the cultures and literary traditions which created them. One also needed to measure them against life. The ultimate measure of Homer, Virgil, and Dante's greatness was that their poems taught one a great deal about life, and that life, in turn, illuminated them.

It is embarrassing to admit now that Fitzgerald's position disturbed us. In Harvard seminars one took care to avoid that four-letter word, *life*. Our graduate program was training us to be professional critics, and the first lesson had been to keep literature separate from that sloppy, subjective category called personal experience. Sensing our skepticism, Fitzgerald borrowed a trick from Homer. He persuaded us through stories. He described how seeing Thiaki, Homer's Ithaka, had not only helped sharpen the language for his translation of the *Odyssey*, but had also clarified the meaning of certain moments in the poem. Likewise he confessed how little he had cared for the *Aeneid* until he read the poem by lamplight in a Quonset hut during the Pacific campaign. Stationed as a naval officer on the battle-torn island of Guam

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preparing for the invasion of Japan, he learned to appreciate the weight of Virgil's moral concerns.

My favorite anecdote came when Fitzgerald was explaining Odysseus' special relationship to his protectress, Athena. At key moments in the *Odyssey*, the goddess visits her hero in disguise. We had just come to the episode in Book VII in which Athena appears to Odysseus as a young girl in pigtails when Fitzgerald told us about his trip to Crete to see Arthur Evans' reconstruction of Knossos. Travelling alone and knowing no modern Greek, he had felt isolated and forlorn the first evening as he walked the streets of Heraklion. Pausing to look in a store window, he heard a voice say in English, "Good evening, sir." He looked up to see a twelve-year-old girl in pigtails standing in the doorway. She had learned English, she explained, while visiting relatives in America. Their conversation cheered him immensely. As they parted, he asked her name. She responded with a common Greek appellation, "I am Athena."

Years later I heard an astronomer explain that the "simplicity and elegance" of a scientific solution represented the best criteria for its adoption. Gradually the simplicity and elegance of Fitzgerald's approach to poetry led me to question my own needlessly complicated methods. I realized how much my critical education had alienated me from my own experience of literature. Fitzgerald's unorthodox and often subjective remarks on poems almost always focused on the features I found most moving and memorable. There had to be some way of reconciling one's intellectual, emotional, and moral responses to literature. "*Hoc opus, hic labor est,*" as Virgil said—"This is the trouble, there is the toil." Achieving that reconciliation would become my challenge. In the meantime it was difficult to despair about the state of literary education while studying the classics with Fitzgerald. "Fortunate he who's made the voyage of Odysseus," wrote George Seferis. What an island of good luck it was to have spent so many afternoons with that small band in Boylston Hall.

IV

But I exaggerate. Only Tuesday and Thursday afternoons were spent in philosophic equipoise. On Monday and Wednesday I left

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Harvard Yard, crossed traffic-choked Massachusetts Avenue, and rode the elevator to the top of Holyoke Center, a bristling modernist high-rise designed by crossing Mies van der Rohe with a porcupine. Here in Fitzgerald's "History of English Versification," I found a more familiar Harvard—crowded, boisterous, and competitive.

On the first day the small room was jammed with students. Like me, most of the men were dressed in that fall's unofficial Harvard uniform—blue jeans, button-down shirt, and corduroy jacket. More diverse, the women displayed two sartorial varieties—preppy and *artiste.* As we waited for Fitzgerald to arrive, no one spoke, but a few glanced systematically from face to face around the table making a dispassionate appraisal of their peers. The crowd grew. Soon students stood two deep along the back and side. I was confused. Why did so many people want to study prosody? And why did everyone look familiar—not so much as individuals but as a group? Finally, breaking the silence, I asked the fellow next to me why this specialized course was so popular.

"Don't know about them" he replied without looking at me, "but I couldn't get into English C. No connections."

"What's English C?" I asked.

"Creative writing," he replied, still looking straight ahead.

"Is that hard to get in?"

"Impossible," he explained, turning ever so slightly my way. "Unless you've got connections."

"But what does this class have to do with creative writing?"

"Don't you know?" he said—now looking straight at me with surprise, Harvard's rarest emotion.

"Know what?"

"Why everyone's here," he responded. "In this class you get to write poems."

Suddenly I realized why everyone looked so familiar—the Viking in the motorcycle jacket, the brunette with waist-length hair, the prematurely gray preppy. They made up the crowd at all the campus poetry readings. These were Harvard's aspiring *literati.*

When Fitzgerald arrived, he surveyed the mob with a veteran's weary resignation. Donning a pair of black-rimmed glasses, he took out a reading list and described each of the eight books on metrics we would be assigned. In addition, we needed to study the

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three volumes of Saintsbury's *History of English Prosody* on reserve at Widener Library. And, yes, we would also read chronologically through all five volumes of Auden and Pearson's *Poets of the English Language*. Already a few faces looked worried. The course sounded as technical as "Introduction to Particle Physics."

Turning to the blackboard, Fitzgerald then explained with many dusty chalkings and erasures his personal system for notating English scansion. Apologizing for its apparent complexity, he reassured us how quickly we would master it through the many written scansions he would assign for each class. There would also be a long term paper on the prosody of a classic poem. And, yes, some memorization. (A student standing near the back door quietly escaped.) Finally, he added that every week we would also be expected to write from fourteen to twenty lines of verse. Here faces brightened.

"I say 'verse,' " he explained, "because I expect nothing so exalted as poetry from these assignments. Each week I will ask you to craft a short passage according to the rules of a particular form. Do not worry about creating art. Worry only about making sense and displaying impeccable prosody." He then turned back to the blackboard and spent the next hour explaining the principles of Greek and Latin metrics. By the end of the period the board was covered with prosodic graphs and long lists of terms like "hemistich" and "antepenult." There were also many lines written like PEISTEON KEI MEDEN HEDU PANTA GAR KAIRO KALA, which was helpfully labeled as "trochaic tetrameter catalectic."

By the time Fitzgerald dismissed us with several handouts to scan, a hundred pages of Saintsbury to read, and two verse exercises (three stanzas in strict Sapphics and fourteen lines of Catullan hendecasyllabics), the class had become considerably less crowded. On my way out someone nudged me from the side. I turned to see a small, wiry, dark-haired fellow who looked like a spider. Not like a tarantula or anything deadly. Just an ordinary spider. "Don't worry," he whispered. "He's just trying to scare us."

My interlocutor was correct. At the next session there were just enough students to fill the large seminar table. Fitzgerald's performance had successfully frightened off the unserious. (I was not surprised to learn years later that both parents had briefly been actors.) Our teacher now relaxed into a more wry and

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congenial presence. Although intellectually demanding, his manner was always gentle and never insistent. Even his rebukes were decorous. Returning an almost illegibly faint typescript to a student one day, Fitzgerald remarked, "A young writer may not be able to change the world, but he can change his typewriter ribbon."

V

Fitzgerald's "History of English Versification" has proved so influential on certain young writers—and through them on current poetry—that it merits some description. As the course title indicates, the structure was chronological. We systematically surveyed the major metrical systems and verse forms of English poetry from Anglo-Saxon alliterative stress meter to modern free verse. Fitzgerald's perspective, however, was inevitably comparative. He consistently examined English prosody in a broader European context. After presenting a passage of English poetry, he would often add relevant lines of Greek, Latin, French, or Italian—quotations, that is, from the foreign literatures British and American poets were most likely to have known in the original.

I recently found a mimeographed handout in my old class notebook. Labeled "The English Heroic Line: A few models, analogues, examples," the sheet lists twenty-five individual lines of verse chronologically arranged from Dante ("*Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura*") to fellow faculty member Robert Lowell ("The Lord survives the rainbow of His will"). The first eight examples come from Italian or French—roughly one third of the total. That fraction accurately reflects the importance of foreign poetry in a class ostensibly on English versification. "You cannot learn to write by reading English," claimed Ezra Pound. Fitzgerald implicitly agreed. His polyglot approach demonstrated how often poetic innovation in English resulted from borrowing an established convention from Latin, French, or Italian. One language's old news becomes "news that stays news" in another.

Scratch a prosodist, and you will usually find a Platonist—except with Fitzgerald. His perspective was not merely Aristotelian but deeply Thomistic. He rarely presented abstract metrical

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patterns in class. He preferred to study individual lines of poetry. General rules were deduced from individual examples, and patterns modified to fit specific poems. Scansion played a central part in his method, but he employed it as a way of apprehending the details of the poem—a sort of auditory close reading. His approach suggested that metrical form did not meaningfully exist outside specific texts. It needed to be embodied in an actual poem.

Free verse teetotalers innocently imagine that metrics is an abstract, intellectual enterprise. For most young poets, however, studying prosody proves an intoxicating experience, a debauchery of verbal dance and music. Fitzgerald understood his subject's drunken appeal. If he never preached temperance, he did emphasize responsible drinking from the Pierian Spring. He constantly reminded us that meter was only one of several features operating in a poem. "Verse is not just meter," he observed, "but also diction, rhetoric, and syntax." Separate the elements, even for pedagogic purposes, and one risked teaching abstract simplifications. The beauty of the poetry arose from the intricate dance of its parts. The study of versification was best understood as a privileged perspective from which to consider the larger question of poetic language.

Underlying the entire course was a profoundly Catholic sense of form as a sacramental instrument of perception. In class Fitzgerald never mentioned Jacques Maritain (though he often cited the French philosopher's two shaping influences, Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas). Maritain's neo-Thomistic ideas, however, were reflected in Fitzgerald's analytical procedures. Reviewing Maritain's *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* twenty years earlier in *The Hudson Review* (Volume VI, Number 2, Summer 1953), Fitzgerald had spent considerable space on Maritain's exegesis of Aquinas' three requirements for beauty—*integritas* (wholeness), *consonantia* (harmony), and *claritas* (radiance). Many readers unfamiliar with philosophy or theology will recognize Aquinas' famous formulation from James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.* In his review Fitzgerald not only provided his own translation of Aquinas' original definition but also quoted a lengthy passage from Maritain that suggests, in an essential way, his own deepest convictions:

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> "If we were able fully to realize the implications of the Aristotelian notion of *form*—which does not mean external form, but on the contrary, the inner ontological principle which determines things in their essences and qualities, and through which they are, and exist, and act—we would also understand the full meaning intended by the great Schoolmen when they described the radiance or clarity inherent in beauty as *splendor formae*, the splendor of the form, say *the splendor of the secrets of being radiating into intelligence.*"

The italics in the final phrase are not found in Maritain's original; they were added by Fitzgerald. For him, poetic form was not an external element but an inner process coming perceptibly into being. One recognized a genuine work of art by its *radiance*, the splendid clarity communicating not only its identity but its mystery. What we apprehend in art, therefore, is always greater than what we understand. Even in poetry, an art drawn from speech, most of a poem's essence remains, to use Rilke's term, "unsayable." We approach art not only with our intellect but also with imagination, intuition, and the instinctive knowledge of our physical senses.

There are currently thousands of poetry-writing courses in America, and virtually all of them employ a variation of the same format—the workshop. Developed at the turn of the century as a progressive teaching method, the workshop made group discussion of student work the focus of writing courses. Fitzgerald's teaching method bore virtually no relation to the workshop technique. Although we wrote one or more poems each week on assignment, we never discussed our work in class. At the beginning of each session, Fitzgerald would return our homework covered with markings penciled in his elegant, small hand. First, he would point out any metrical mistakes or, to use his term, "infelicities." His technical comments were always specific. He scanned every line and syllable one wrote. "This anapest is too clumpy and blocky," he noted on one of my assignments, then followed a few lines later with "This anapest the same." He would also mention anywhere the verses failed to make literal sense. His commentary usually stopped there. He maintained no pretense that we were writing deathless poetry—a liberating assumption for students writing on assignment. He insisted only that we seriously grapple with each form and handle our language responsibly.

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Occasionally Fitzgerald began class by writing a student line or two on the blackboard for special praise or censure, but he never identified its author. The line was offered as an example either of a fault we needed to avoid or a virtue deserving common pursuit. By freeing students from public evaluation of their work, he eliminated the complex group dynamics and self-esteem issues that bedevil most workshops. His focus was always on the work not the workshoppers. He, moreover, focused on classic poetry not student poems-in-progress. Like a clockmaker taking apart an expensive timepiece, he meticulously unfolded each masterpiece so that we could see the complex but purposeful workings. He consistently set our standards at the highest levels. Young writers are instinctively competitive. Fitzgerald did not deny our competitive urges. We were encouraged, however, not to measure our poetic performance against one another, but against Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, and the other classic authors of our language.

Fitzgerald also developed the only sensible system I have ever seen for grading student poems. Part of its charm was that he never explained it. In addition to his comments, each poem he returned bore a series of capital letters in the top right-hand corner. We recognized these abbreviations as grades, but it took a few weeks to figure out his system. His grading scale—from best to worst—ran NAAB, NB, NTB, and PB. I'm happy to say I never got a PB, though I did once acquire an inglorious NTB. I only managed NAAB twice. With a candor characteristic of its creator, Fitzgerald's system concedes that the absence of badness is the proper aspiration for a student poem.

In my own case, the benefits of Fitzgerald's tutelage can hardly be overstated. By the time I arrived in English 283, I had been trying to write formal verse on my own for nearly six years. An autodidact may not always have a fool for a teacher, but he often has an incompetent. With the innocent arrogance of youth, I thought I knew a great deal about prosody. In retrospect, my comprehension was undisciplined, incomplete, and approximate. Fitzgerald's rigorous but congenial approach was exactly what I needed. He quietly insisted that our work be held to the only proper standard of poetry: every word, every phrase, every line must be right. Any less exacting standard was unworthy.

If Fitzgerald's standards were rigorous, his aesthetic principles

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remained liberal. While insisting we master the old measures with scrupulous exactitude, he never discouraged us from working in free verse—or any other technique. He declined to proselytize for a single style. He advocated only precision, compression, and elegance. At Stanford, where I had spent my undergraduate years, free verse and formal poets had occupied opposing camps. As a young writer who wished to work in both modes, I did not understand why one style should preclude the other. (Little did I guess then that the already incipient Poetry Wars would only grow more widespread and intense over the next two decades.) At Harvard, however, neither Fitzgerald nor his fellow instructor, Elizabeth Bishop, considered metrical poetry and free verse as mutually exclusive techniques. They were complementary ways of writing poetry. The important thing was to use each technique well.

Fitzgerald's taste was both broad and refreshingly unfussy. To give an idea of his range of response, let me offer a few examples from a single afternoon's session. The subject was the relation of free verse technique and prose style. Fitzgerald began by quoting from three letters Gustave Flaubert sent to Louise Colet. ("A good prose sentence should be like a good line of poetry—*unchangeable*, just as rhythmic, just as sonorous.") Then we moved to Hopkins' famous letter to Robert Bridges on sprung rhythm. ("It is nearest to the rhythm of prose, that is the native and natural rhythm of speech . . . ") Then he quoted a passage from Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part II* in which verse and prose were intermingled. Fitzgerald now followed with a few sentences from Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* that could be satisfactorily rearranged into free verse. Finally, he arrived at Eliot's "Ash Wednesday" to discuss the rhythms of syntax. Having analyzed these passages, Fitzgerald then led us into a consideration of the differing free verse techniques of Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams. There was nothing narrow or doctrinaire about Fitzgerald's curriculum.

Tradition, wrote T. S. Eliot, "cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour." Fitzgerald's courses in versification and epic carefully outlined the nature of that labor. A less abundantly gifted teacher might have minimized the effort and endurance required to master the craft of poetry. Fitzgerald painstakingly noted the challenges that existed at every level of

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proficiency. Twice he quoted the maxim Seneca drew from Hippocrates, *Vita brevis est, ars longa.* Neither Seneca nor Hippocrates, he reminded us, implied that art endures, as the phrase is so often misconstrued. Instead, the Latin meant, as Chaucer so aptly translated it, "The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne." The humane arts are immensely difficult to master. They require a life of constant application. If Fitzgerald warned us of the struggles ahead, he also showed us the multitudinous pleasures of the craft. We felt—perhaps for the first time—the kinship of artists dedicated to a common pursuit. "Sweet are the pleasures that to verse belong," wrote Keats, "And doubly sweet a brotherhood in song."

VI

Almost from the first I had recognized that Fitzgerald was powerfully refining my sense of poetic craft. What I did not know then, however, was the profound effect he exercised on a generation of Harvard poets. Culture depends on human energy, and there are particular moments and places where artists meet in ways that decisively shape their futures. In retrospect, Fitzgerald's classes in Cambridge, especially his "History of English Versification," provided one such influential nexus. (He succeeded Archibald MacLeish as the Boylston Professor in 1965 and served until his retirement in 1981.) He became a crucial mentor to a disproportionate number of the young poets who later emerged as the so-called New Formalists. No one imagined such a movement at the time, and it is unlikely that Fitzgerald intended to create a revival of formal and narrative verse. Confessionalism and Deep Image were then the reigning fashions, and free verse was the almost universal style among poets under fifty. Fitzgerald was modestly famous but almost entirely as a translator of the classics. Already in his sixties, he seemed an unlikely influence on the young. Moreover, Fitzgerald's presence at Harvard in the early seventies—like Elizabeth Bishop's—was overshadowed by Robert Lowell, who was then unquestionably America's most famous poet. A quarter century later, however, the extent of Fitzgerald's influence appears a verifiable fact of literary history.

A significant number of his students—most of whom did not

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yet know one another—became actively involved in reviving rhyme and meter during the 1980s. A short list of Fitzgerald students conspicuously interested in formal poetry would include Robert B. Shaw, Brad Leithauser, Mary Jo Salter, Rachel Hadas, Elise Paschen, David Rothman, and myself. Although these poets share a common fascination with form—traditional or experimental—anyone familiar with their work may be more deeply impressed by their diversity. Fitzgerald inspired his students to explore form without imposing his own sensibility on them. (By contrast, Stanford formalists of the same period, as Robert Shaw has noted, display considerably more stylistic uniformity.) If one adds to this core group his former students who do not customarily work in meter but nonetheless demonstrate formal proclivities—poets like Judith Baumel, April Bernard, Katha Pollitt, and Cynthia Zarin—then the diversity of his influence becomes extraordinary. These students also reflect Fitzgerald's influence in another way. Many of them have designed courses on poetic form consciously modeled after the "History of English Versification." Fitzgerald's ideas on prosody and poetic language, therefore, are now reaching a new generation of young writers across the country. "If he was our Odysseus," one former student told me, "he had more than one Telemachus."

There is so much else I could write about Robert. If I have said almost nothing about his personal life, it is because he deserves a full-length biography. His childhood was scarred by a series of family tragedies. When he was three, his mother died in childbirth. Five years later his only brother perished in the influenza epidemic. Meanwhile his father was invalided by osteomyelitis, and eventually died when Robert was only seventeen. These losses might have crippled a less distinguished soul. One could also write a book about Robert's literary friendships. His intimates included Flannery O'Connor, James Agee, William Maxwell, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Eileen Simpson, Dudley Fitts, Paula Deitz, Frederick Morgan, James Laughlin, Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon and Vachel Lindsay—not to mention his close but difficult relations with Ezra Pound. Likewise, a proper appreciation of Robert's work in poetry and translation remains to be written. He stands as American literature's preeminent translator of classical poetry. His reputation rests not only on his celebrated versions of the *Odyssey* (1961), the *Iliad* (1974), and the *Aeneid*

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(1983), but equally on his powerful, stageworthy renditions of Sophocles and Euripides, which remain unsurpassed after half a century. From the first these translations won the praise of cognoscenti, but they have also earned huge popular followings. His *Odyssey*, for example, has sold nearly two million copies—making it one of the century's best-selling books of verse. Finally, there is Robert's Catholicism, which exerted a powerful effect on many students—myself included. He was the only professor I had in eight years of college and graduate school who was an openly practicing Catholic. Quietly devout, he was also deeply knowledgeable about Catholic intellectual tradition. His own verse occupies an important place in the history of American Catholic poetry. At Harvard he became a role model for many religious artists and intellectuals—including Jews and Protestants. I could have written on any of these important areas, but I felt it best to concentrate on the one aspect of his life I knew best—his teaching of poetry.

Teaching hovers between two realities. First, there is the material overtly being taught. Then there is what one really learns, which may have little to do with the announced curriculum. So much of what one absorbs comes neither from lesson nor lecture but from example. The way a person teaches inevitably becomes an essential part of what is taught. Robert Fitzgerald was a splendid teacher in both ways. His courses broadened our knowledge of poetry and deepened our pleasure in the art. Meanwhile his personal presence provided an unforgettable example of an artist intellectual who was both genuinely good and deeply learned. Whenever I read Maritain's phrase, "the secrets of being radiating into intelligence," I think at once of Robert and the aura of wisdom and grace he brought into class. It is a light I still learn by.

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JOCELYN BARTKEVICIUS

Hat Check Noir

Who told thee that thou wast naked?
—Genesis 3:11

The Emerald Room has been smashed to pieces, carted away by trucks. Mounds of dirt and broken concrete spill out into the parking lot. The Emerald Room was once a fortress, a huge stucco building set on an island of concrete extending across the sand and into Long Island Sound. The place, so vast in my childhood and memory, looks small in its emptiness. I climb over a mound and find the high concrete pool deck intact. The waves below beat against it. The in-ground pool remains, still aquamarine and white. At the bottom, in a few feet of murky water, is a broken dining room chair, emerald green vinyl, torn. I stand on a mound and see, half buried, the filter system's round wooden cover. There, underground, my stepfather's brother died in his arms one summer day. My foot just misses the bleached skeleton of a cat, sharp eyeteeth exposed, more fierce in death than in life. It is 1996, and The Emerald Room, like 42nd Street New York, has been disassembled. Gone are the last traces of seediness, the final remnants of desire.

My mother must have gazed for years across East Broadway. From the little tar-shingled house we shared with her mother and brothers, she could see The Emerald Room's neon sign, the cars pulling in, and hear, on a still summer night, a snatch of jazz from the band. Summer afternoons we walked together on the beach or on the sidewalk along East Broadway, and I learned that the road was wide—a boulevard—so that men had room to pull up and yell things about her legs in those shorts, her breasts in that blouse.

At night, she'd look out the front window at the club framed by the beach, Long Island Sound, and East Broadway, and I'd look out the back door at the small amusement park. I listened to the

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drum beat of the merry-go-round, felt it boom in my chest. Nearly back-to-back, our dreams pulled us in different directions. I hoped for the quick pleasure of an evening: pink cotton candy dissolving on the back of my tongue, a fast ride in a circle, the rise and fall of a carousel horse, arm held out for the unreachable silver ring, the drum beat taking over my heart. My mother, too, longed for glitter and excitement: sequined blouses, satin high heels, live big band music, vodka Collinses burning their way down her throat. But she also dreamed of something more substantial: of rescue, being transported out of the shack, her mother's house—house without a father—into the arms of the man in the dark suit and flashy car, into the story line she'd watched so often in *To Have and Have Not* and *Casablanca*, her favorites.

In 1962, when I was six, she married again, and The Emerald Room was ours.

In the darkened room, the hydraulic stage rose above our heads. Couples sat at vast tables or cozy booths, bottles and glasses before them. I sat with my stepfather, Kirdy, and my mother. They were shapes, presences, shadows blocking the stage lights. They were whiffs of cologne, a vague warmth. Kirdy disappeared, returned, the music changed. He disappeared and appeared again. The band started "Tequila" with a quick Latin beat. The exotic dancer, in sequined G-string and pasties, pranced round the stage. In front of me, on a crisp white tablecloth lit by candles was a plate of food I'd picked over: a few French fries, a glob of ketchup, half a steak sandwich, crust of bread. In front of me was the stripper holding out her arms, rocking her torso hula-hoop fashion, twirling the tassels on her pasties. You looked straight ahead, your vision as unwavering as the channel lights above.

The Emerald Room was a film noir set, Kirdy the hero. He moved quickly through darkened rooms in a black suit, smoking cigarettes, downing Scotches. He was Rick in *Casablanca*. Saturday night was the rise of the stage, the blare of the horns, the beat of the drum, cigarette smoke, a woman disrobing, an M.C. telling jokes, couples dancing, the clink of glasses, the family table in the dining room, moon over Long Island Sound as we drove off for breakfast at the Duchess Diner.

The Emerald Room was a prominence, a concrete block

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constructed by Kirdy and his brother, set out from surrounding buildings (cottages, Malafronte's meat market, Anne's Newfield Bakery, the tiny branch of the A & P). It stretched from land to beach to sea. Waves splashed against concrete, against rusting support rods that jutted out into the crests and above, signaling that the brothers weren't yet done, that they would pour more concrete, extend The Emerald Room farther out against the tides. Summer days meant sitting by the salt water pool looking out over sparkling water or down at people lying in the sand, at Kirdy and his brother who dug for clams below.

Home was an old two-story gray clapboard just a mile from the club, but away from the beach, a place where the poor and bums didn't live. My mother and Kirdy built a bar room—a little replica of The Emerald Room—a vast rectangular addition with red geometric rugs and a black and gold padded vinyl bar. They made a baby, a colicky girl who cried all night. Home was the new room filled with smoke, men at the bar, women along the walls on couches and chairs. Downstairs the party, upstairs the children. Home was the new baby screaming in the dark, until I climbed into her crib to calm her down.

Sunday was a somnambulistic blur, a visit with my father and then *bam*—Monday morning, and the fluorescent lights of school, the smell of children's puke made of sour milk and spaghetti sauce. At the reading table, we got our first word, "Look," in giant letters under a picture of Sally. Little blonde Sally looked at Spot the dog. "Look," we all said. We turned the page and Spot was running. "See Spot run," we said. We were learning baby talk, baby read. We were reading about how someone thought we lived, like Dick and Jane, all pudgy-cheeked and smiling, tucked safe away on a tree-lined street. Father lived with them and smiled and wore baggy suits so you didn't think about what was underneath. He waved good-bye to Mother who stayed home, protected in her apron, cotton shield. She baked all day, invented ways to make children smile, keep them chubby and small, especially the girls, while Dick ran wild through the neighborhood with Spot. Dick and Dad out in the wild world and all us girls inside.

But I knew the secret place adults went to at night, the last moment of the show, "Tequila," what it all built up to, what everyone was waiting for.

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Other than Barbie's, the exotic dancers' were the first grown-up bodies I saw exposed, or almost, since by law they stopped at G-string and pasties. My mother and grandmother always covered themselves carefully, sleeping in long flannel nightgowns or pajamas, emerging from the bathroom fully dressed each morning. Barbie, you would think, with her sculpted curves, that idealized woman's body for little girls to play with, to hold in idle hands, would intersect with Saturday nights. But our play was tame, scripted by Mattel. She shopped for new clothes, went to parties, set up her big cardboard Dream House.

Barbie didn't have a body and she wasn't a woman. I held her in my hand. I saw molded pink plastic. The strippers had bodies, soft bouncy flesh, curves and fat under lightly tanned skin. Barbie was hard and unforgiving, immovable in those days before the snapping, bendable knees. Her foot was perpetually arched like my mother's, jutting from open-toed high heels. Strippers had arched feet too, but glided across the stage, smooth and graceful, raising a leg high into the air to remove a silk stocking. Barbie was a mannequin, a clothes hanger. The idea was to dress her, and we even got directions with the clothes: Dress Barbie feet first, the way a real model dresses. Her legs grew dark from the sweat of my hands. Her body remained immovable as her beehive hair, unkissable plastic lips pursed forever in petulant disfavor, blue eyes staring, perpetually fish-like. The exotic dancers moved and danced, blew kisses, peeled off clothes like onion skin.

Those first three years in the club, before I was tall enough to work the hat check room, I shadowed my mother like an understudy, a tiny replica quiet at her side. By day, we sat near the pool, laughing and drinking—Tom Collinses for her, pitchers of Coke for me. Now and then, Kirdy and his brother swam the length of the pool underwater, emerged laughing loud, telling jokes. Aside from that the brothers painted, built, and repaired as if The Emerald Room rested on their shoulders.

By night, we sat at the family table looking calm and pretty while Kirdy jumped up to cook steaks and lobsters, work the lights, talk to his brother, greet customers, or grab a quick shot in the bar with the men. It was the perfect table, just inside the French doors from the lobby, set diagonal to the stage. It allowed clear access to the lobby, light panel, and hydraulic lever that

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worked the stage. Kirdy could survey the whole dining room: the entertainers, the customers, his wife and stepdaughter, the waiters in their tuxedos carrying drink trays in the air or holding out arms lined with plates of lobster and steak. Three lines of drinks fanned out on our table—Send one to the Stellas, the regulars said. Shot glasses of amber fanned out in front of Kirdy, tall frosted glasses ringed with citrus near my mother, and Seven Ups with maraschino cherries by me. Their drinks disappeared as steadily as they arrived, while I rarely got through my second, and my mother and Kirdy lost me, perhaps, in the blur.

The show began with a roar as the hydraulic car lift—converted and concealed beneath the stage by Kirdy and his brother—raised the stage above the tables, transforming the wooden dance floor into a platform for entertainers. The band, in a permanently raised shell behind the stage, played something from Benny Goodman as the Master of Ceremonies burst through the kitchen's swinging double doors, jogged across the room between tables, up the three steps, and stood mid-stage, mike in hand, legs wide as if balancing on a moving ship. He told the kind of jokes I wasn't supposed to get: men turning up in the ladies' room, babies conceived in back seats of cars, and a few I really couldn't figure out, though I tried to memorize them for later, when I'd gain knowledge or experience, maturity or sophistication—whatever you got with the passage of time.

Near the end of his act, the comic introduced the singer. She walked out of the kitchen, sultry in a red satin evening gown with stiletto heels to match. She sang slow jazz and popular tunes, "Moon Over Miami" or "Misty," which the women called out for. Her hair glowed under the bright lights until the comic came back, initiated applause and helped her down the stairs. He told one more joke, then introduced what they'd been waiting for, a woman with a name as exotic as her dance, something foreign, like Monique, Jade, or Tanya. (Less often she had a hooker name, like Candy Kane, after whose act Kirdy berated his agent in a long long-distance call.) Sophisticated as the singer, the dancer paused at the swinging kitchen doors, then walked out slowly—back straight, hips rolling—to the stairs where the comic offered his hand. He served her up like a lady. He saved his special voice for her introduction, low, almost hushed, and he looked at her with reverence. She could really dance, this Monique, Jade, or Tanya

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(unlike Candy Kane, who bounced and wiggled), and she changed her dance for each song, for each layer of clothing she removed—one or two pieces per song—from "Satin Doll" to "Take the A Train" to "Tequila." At the transitions, Kirdy rose up from our table to work the lights, turning off one or two of the channel lights as the dancer undressed, illuminating her body with soft pastels.

Within three years our world split open. Beneath the concrete pool deck where we drank and laughed, Kirdy's brother was electrocuted while tending the filter system, falling back into Kirdy's arms. Before: sun on the water, brothers clamming at low tide, brothers and wives drinking by the sparkling pool, freshly painted buildings, Kirdy's laugh. After: the hushed women by the pool and Kirdy perpetually working, still life in overalls with scraper and paintbrush. And still he kept up those Saturday nights.

On Saturday mornings we prepared for the night. Kirdy's work began at dawn. I'd creep downstairs and find him leaning over a row of cards and sipping coffee, an eyebrow rising and falling, planning his work, reading his life. If he saw me in the doorway he waved me away or collected the cards, then jumped into his old station wagon—the back filled with tools, boxes, planks that hung out the back window—to go buy the food (live lobsters, headless shrimp, a side of beef). He carved and cooked what could be prepared ahead of time. One cracked and callused hand gripped the side of beef while the other sliced through it quickly, carving steaks on the butcher-block table in the nightclub's kitchen. His white apron was bloodstained by the time he turned the lobsters over on their backs, one by one, and gutted them while their claws writhed. He cooked the stuffing, stuffed the lobsters, slid them into the oven. He cut potatoes into French fries. He oversaw the setup, the stock, the staff. My mother's youngest brother, Norman, who had followed across East Broadway in our wake, helped out in the kitchen, cleaning the broilers and throwing salads together.

With the TV on, my mother lounged on the couch in her orange bathrobe, saving up for the night, encouraging me to join her. My sister, now a toddler, napped at her side or sat on the

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kitchen floor peeling labels from cans of Campbell's chicken noodle soup and Shop Rite peas. Come rest, my mother said, conserve your energy, and so I went outside with a superball or hid out in my room with Barbie. Rest, my mother believed, was all that stood between her and pasty skin and dark circles under the eyes. She worked to maintain a presence fit for the owner's wife, to look—until we closed the club at 2:00 A.M.—like the prized younger woman she was. As my mother got ready those long afternoons a movie flickered in the background. Lauren Bacall won Bogart's cold heart in some nightclub in Martinique, or Sam Spade solved a crime and broke a heart.

Kirdy would race in, head to his small bathroom in the old part of the house to ditch the flannel shirt or white T-shirt, his dirty painter's pants. Don't forget your *balloon* pants, my mother teased. She'd shown him the new men's suits in *Life*, the slimmer pants, but he resisted. You could parachute from a plane in those baggy, pleated things, she said when he emerged in a dark suit.

The bathroom steamy from her shower, her hair in curlers, my mother stood in a nightgown applying makeup to her pretty face. In the door frame hung the night's possible outfits: a pink sequined blouse and black skirt, a little black dress, a red Jackie Kennedy suit she never chose. She believed a woman's instep must be prominently arched, must thrust itself out of black or silver spike-heeled shoes, and she lined the shoes up beside the closet door. If she caught a glimpse of me flying past the door with my tomboy walk, she stepped out of the bathroom, called me back, and made me walk up and down the room, practicing the stride her shoes produced, preparing me for womanhood. Stay on the floor, she said. Put the energy into your hips, not your legs. And she'd demonstrate. "Wrong" was walking up on toes, bobbing vertically. "Right" was sliding hips from side to side, head drawing one continuous line parallel to the floor.

Slender, buxom, clear-complected and pretty (you're Irish and you're beautiful, a stranger said to her one night), with nothing to hide, my mother used clothes and makeup to accentuate. She wore high heels to extend long legs and firm calves, outlined eyes in black, filled in and carefully arched slender brows, reddened and blotted lips. Lift the toilet seat on a Saturday afternoon, and you'd find a perfect square of tissue imprinted with my mother's red lips, floating like a lily pad.

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The year I turned ten my mother became the maitre d' and I became the hat check girl. I made the transition from sitting at the family table to being an entrepreneur. One Friday afternoon Kirdy walked me into the bar, led me behind the counter, and opened the old silver-toned cash register. Like an abbreviated slot machine, it rang up two black zeroes with a two syllable ring. Kirdy, who had been working on the hydraulic system beneath the stage, looked incongruous behind the bar in his grease-stained pants and faded flannel shirt from Bradlees.

Here, he said, counting out twenties, a loan against the first few months' take. He gave me a small stack of twenties, more than I'd ever held in my hands. Next we went into the kitchen. This is for your tips, he said, and pulled down a roll basket from the shelves. He sent me off with my mother to Alexander's department store where I invested in my concession. We looked at the special hangers, thick varnished wood, pine and cedar, suitable for heavy fur coats, suitable for displaying to customers in expensive suits. I was not used to such extravagance: Barbie clothes cost ninety-nine cents, or the better ones, a couple of dollars. A new shirt for me might cost a few dollars more. And so it frightened me to spend nearly a hundred dollars that day on enough hangers to fill two large shopping bags. All that money, all that heft to carry out of the store, and nothing to play with or wear.

That evening I went with Kirdy to fix up my concession. He brought a vacuum cleaner, Windex, and a roll of paper towels. Any change from the hangers? he asked. I must have looked pained when I gave him the few coins left from shopping. It's a business, he said, an investment. He put a five in my tip basket and walked away.

A hat check girl was the movies, woman in black, red lipstick against flickering shadows, a nightclub in New York, the 1940s. A hat check girl was me, ten and skinny and just tall enough to reach the hangers and shelf above. I lined fedoras in a row, green plastic numbers leaning against them. Far back in the narrow wedge of the room I tended, I rubbed my face in a rabbit coat, leaned back into the minks, disappearing into animal skins, into darkness.

At home I played with Barbie, blonde and bubble-headed, dressing her up in satin and velvet. On Saturday night she stayed

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home and I dressed myself in black and fake sequins to work at the club. I dressed Barbie, I dressed me, and what was the difference? Her body was curvy but plastic, mine soft but flat. It was the end result that counted, the clothes, not us.

Outside it was 1966 and the good girls still wore Peter Pan collars, crisp white blouses, pleated skirts, and knee socks. The radio played the Beatles and Rolling Stones until my mother switched to "The William B. Williams Show" which had Frank Sinatra instead. Shadows on the evening news: people shouting, fists up; people on fire; soldiers running, diving onto the ground. People were saying things like, *maybe it's time to drop the big one over there*, a slogan they picked up on TV. But inside The Emerald Room it was still 1945, the big war just over, Kirdy and his customers swaggered in the hubris of their monumental victory. They thought back to their tour of duty over there (or for the women, to the letters they wrote our boys over there). They danced to the same music, threw the American dollar around, left me wool hats and fur coats, dropped a fin in my tip basket, and ordered up bottles of Scotch as they watched the burlesque show imported directly from 42nd Street, New York, New York.

I worked a long narrow wedge of a room off the lobby. If I leaned on my counter I could see the lush red lobby stretching out before me, the telephone booth, the carpeted staircase to hotel rooms (for summer tourists and weekend revelers), and the cigarette machine with Fred the policeman leaning against it. To my right, French doors opened onto the dining room, where a woman disrobed slowly to "Satin Doll." To my left was the bar, cool green and dark, teeming with men holding cigarettes and shots of Scotch. On the counter my bread basket overflowed with bills. Just outside the lobby, a valet met cars under the marquee, opened doors, mumbled obsequious pleasantries, took keys. The marquee was white, art deco, a wedge. On top of the marquee, "The Emerald Room" in huge green letters against a block of white light faced up East Broadway, the avenue that followed east along Long Island Sound. On the tinted front window of the bar, "The Emerald Room" glowed in green neon. From inside the coatroom I imagined those signs, how they called people into our world.

Downstairs in the foyer beyond my left wall was the grand entrance, invisible from where I stood. When customers entered,

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the Venetian blinds banged as the lobby door shut. I felt a blast of cold. I'd hear them scuff their shoes on the stairs, wipe their feet on the rubber mat. And then (some just ahead of the men who held the door or saw to the car keys) the women emerged into my field of vision. Next to my counter, a sign leaned against the wall: *Hats and Coats Checked, 25 Cents.* But unless I spoke, the customers, mesmerized by the music, the laughter, the colored lights of the dining room, were likely to walk by.

Would you like to check your coats? I'd ask newcomers. They would turn abruptly, startled perhaps at seeing a child. The regulars faced me immediately upon entering the lobby, the women waiting impatiently for the gentlemen to help with their coats. The couple we called Fred and Ginger (for their elaborate dance routines between shows) stood that way, barely speaking, the woman looking somewhere off beyond me with distrust, as if she expected me to smear a Hershey bar on her rabbit coat. The men held their wives' coats like beloved animals, in two hands, lifted them over my counter, exchanging fur for plastic tags. They'd slip the tag into a pocket as I hung the coat on a thick wooden hanger with a twin tag over the hook.

Though newcomers were surprised they were sometimes less disdainful, and those new men stopped to flirt with me on their way from dining room to bar. The men's bathroom—with its "Gents" sign hand painted by Kirdy—was strategically located in the bar, virtually men only on Saturday nights. On trips to the bathroom, before their wives missed them, the men could stop for a shot, catch a score from the TV, and flirt with a little blonde hat check girl whose slightly made up face and faux sequined shirt belied her age. The women's bathroom—with a preprinted plastic panel labeled "Ladies"—was in the dining room, a short walk from even the least desirable tables, just down from the swinging door to the kitchen, far from the exit to the lobby.

On summer days, I walked with Kirdy out into the water in front of The Emerald Room or a half mile away at the point (where the Housatonic River empties into Long Island Sound) and searched for clams. Kirdy tied the mesh bag around his waist, and I tossed clams over as I found them. His green plaid boxer bathing suit ballooned out, rose and fell with the waves. He bought me a bright red clamming fork with enamel paint that stayed intact and

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bright in spite of being immersed in corrosive salt water and being scraped against sand, stones, and clams. Together, we raked the ocean floor. We walked carefully, feeling the sandbar beneath the water, feet like hands tracing the ripples left by the undertow, searching for clams. Like clamming forks feet recognize the difference between clam and rock, the angle of protuberance, the texture, the ridges. With a wave of his hand, Kirdy dismissed the new poison signs that stretched out along the shore.

Look at this, he said, something moved in here. He held out a conch shell half the size of my fist. I walked toward him, my legs heavy against the water. He held the shell sideways, opening facing me. A hermit crab stuck out its claw. I took the shell to observe more closely, the claw retreating and jutting out, grabbing at the air. There he goes, I said, letting the crab sink slowly into the murky depths. Kirdy lifted his rake and put another fat cherry stone clam into the mesh bag. You know your mother won't eat these, he said. He nodded toward the poison signs. She'll listen to that, he added. I know it, I said. He shrugged. Well, he said, she doesn't know what she's missing. It's just gonna be you and me, kid.

I reveled in the rare moment of culinary fellowship; usually, I was the butt of such remarks, abstaining while he and my mother gobbled down squid, frog legs, pungent fried fish, or escarole and chicory thick with olive oil and bitter herbs. We turned back to our work, silent in the rhythm of our raking and the waves. After an hour we walked back out of the water, clamming forks and burlap bag full of clams becoming heavier as the water subsided. I trotted over the hot sand while Kirdy walked slowly, oblivious to pain. We took home a bushel bag full of fat clams, their gray shells etched with white grooves. I made cocktail sauce out of ketchup, horseradish, Tabasco, and lemon, while Kirdy opened a dozen clams with a flick of his flat, dull knife. Whatever poisons the signs warned against were imperceptible to eye, nose, and tongue and we ate the clams raw just as we had for years.

At home, Norman baby-sat some evenings. He was my mother's baby brother, only twelve years older than I, and in the days when we lived together in my grandmother's house, I had pretended he was my big brother. One night, he came in and as usual turned on the TV and opened a beer. I got out my patent leather Barbie

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case, designed to suggest a woman's carryon makeup case. Play Barbie, I said. Get outta here, he said. Please? I opened the cardboard Dream House, took Barbie and her clothes out of the case. Forget it, Norman said. Come on, I said, whining slightly. Finally he agreed, a long shot come true. I grabbed the Ken doll from the closet upstairs.

Barbie can fix up the house while Ken goes to work, Norman said. He grabbed the doll and took off into the kitchen. Ken went to work shoeless, dressed in tight brown pants and a striped sweater. I set up furniture in the three-sided house: sturdy cardboard couch and chair in a deep red plaid, a pull-out bed. I found a tiny plastic hanger for each Barbie outfit and hung everything neatly in the open closet. Kneeling, I brought out my favorite Barbie dress: red velvet strapless top with white satin flowing knee-length skirt. I dressed her from the feet up (like a real fashion model), struggling to pull the fitted top over her breasts. When she was ready I hunted for the missing white high heel, and found it just as Ken came home from work.

Ken came home from work via Norman sliding across the floor on his knees. He held Ken by the torso, and began knocking furniture around with the stiff plastic legs. *Ahhh*, he said, feigning a scream, Ken comes home drunk! Stop it, I said. He kicked the furniture out of the house, ripped the clothes from the closet. Quit it, I yelled. Ken comes home drunk, he said, and beats up Barbie. Ken kicked Barbie, harder and harder, sometimes striking her stomach or legs, sometimes getting my hand instead, until he knocked her out of my grip.

In the concrete edifice, an ocean away from Long Island, a boulevard away from my grandmother's house, far from home and dressed in a mock-adult costume, I took a break from the hat checkroom to sit at the family table. The dancer's long strides took her round and round the stage. Couples at tables nearly touching the stage looked up at her, up long legs at her G-string, up a softly rounded belly to the underside of her breasts. Farther back, I sat with my mother and Kirdy. The dancer unfastened her top, and suddenly a hand was on my arm. Kirdy leaned over, shook my arm. The silver top sparkled in the dancer's hand. His hand gripped my arm tighter, his face moved close to mine. You see that? he said into my ear. He shook my arm again. That's a

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pig, he said. Around and around she danced, shaking, strutting. All faces were raised to her. I don't ever want to see you up there, he said. He moved his face away and let go of my arm. The smell of Scotch and Old Spice lingered about me. My face felt warm, I wanted to tell him that in all my girlish imaginings, of which there had been a few—an embrace from one of the Beatles, becoming the TV detective called Honey who flirted and kept an ocelot for a pet—never once had I imagined stepping onto a stage and undressing before a roomful of people. But I said nothing. I looked straight ahead, my vision a steady beam like the channel lights he got up just then to tend. The dancer sat on the edge of an emerald green chair, removed one spike-heeled shoe, pulled her stocking down slowly. Kirdy dimmed the lights.

Fifth grade was recitation: *four threes are twelve, four fours are sixteen, four score and seven years ago.* It was the German shepherd in the yard alongside our classroom howling with the twelve o'clock whistle. Mr. K.—the most popular teacher, and the first man we'd had in grade school—said, I had to leave my car at home, it's a *stationary* wagon. He said, take a good look at that grammar book, store it at the back of your desks, and you'll never see it again. Not once that year did we study his abhorred grammar. Girls whose parents worked real jobs wore pleated skirts, white blouses, knee socks, Band-Aids on knees. We brought our Barbies and cases to school, showed them off secretly in the coatroom, then concealed them beneath our coats. Fifth grade was history, geography, hangman on the blackboard, murals at the back of the room. At lunchtime we played Red Rover and fence tag, boys and girls at war, capturing and imprisoning each other against the chainlink fence at the top of the hill.

School was a grade divided in half and choosing your half: the artsy wimp section (usually girls) that stayed in with Miss H. to draw, or the gutsy athletic one (usually boys) that played touch football out in the sun. It was huddling and then racing up and down the narrow side field, a former air strip said to be haunted by ghosts from a plane crash. It was Mr. K. as quarterback on the girls' team. It was running out as wide receiver, watching the ball spiral out from Mr. K.'s fingertips into my arms. Outside, we ran with the boys—our legs fast, our skirts flying up. But back inside (quietly, one hand beneath the reading table, a big foot dragging

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your leg toward him, a fingertip lifting a hem), Mr. K. reminded us that we were girls.

An intermezzo of memory: I walked through the dining room, comic on stage to my right, waiters at the kitchen doors to my left. In the dim ladies' room, I walked past the dancer who was fixing her makeup at the mirror, went into the middle stall, and when I emerged she was still there, standing by the black vinyl seat of an old dining booth, her body round and smooth as a scaled-down Botticelli nude. She was soft, silent, her black hair long and shining. She was staring at me. I washed then dried my hands and the electric dryer drowned out the music and voices from beyond the door. I kept my head down, intent on my hands, dry beyond dryness, warm air spreading over them. Finally I had to turn and she was standing there still. She wore a sheer blouse over her costume, her stomach puffed a bit like my cousins'. We were the same height, but I was girl skinny and I kept my head down. She told me she was not always like that, that she was watery before her time of the month, that mine was the kind of body to be proud of, that mine was the kind of body she could have. She looked at me with desire and regret as I had looked only at possessions (like the rabbit stole of a friend's Barbie). And she looked at me, at my waist and thighs, until I left, walked back out into the darkened dining room, into the music, the smoke, the night.

School followed Saturday night, Saturday night followed school. I didn't know our work was suspect until Cindy, my best friend from school, couldn't come to the club to swim in the pool or build castles on the beach, not even on a hot Indian summer day with no show, entertainers back in New York City, waiters and band members in their day jobs. That year I went to church from time to time with Cindy's family, and sat surrounded by stained glass and booming arpeggios in an unfamiliar church. Before my mother's remarriage, when we'd lived with her mother, I'd follow Grandma up the hill to the small church on Maplewood Avenue and sit quietly beside her as she played the organ in the choir loft. But Myrtle Beach Church had been torn down as the neighborhood began to crumble. Church that year with Cindy's parents was a drive to Milford Center, older girls from the rich side of town who shot looks at us and said, girls from the beach, those

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beachies in *our* church. It was the minister reading from Genesis. It was finding out that until the snake came to entice them, the first woman and the first man did not realize what it meant to be naked, how bodies must be concealed. They sinned and then the Lord came down to walk upon the earth and said: *Who told thee that thou wast naked?* And because they'd found out, the snake had to slide on his belly, the man had to work hard planting seeds in dust, and the woman had to suffer pain in childbirth. But she also had to feel desire. Only to the woman did the Lord assign two consequences, only to her did he speak of desire. And her desire brought more trouble: *Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.*

"Tequila": breasts bouncing, silver tasseled pasties spinning to the quick beat, dancer circling the stage, spinning, spinning, mesmerizing the men with that siren song. Tanya held two long boa constrictors and then they held her, crawling over the surface of her body, wrapping themselves slowly around her arms, and then her torso. One extended down her thigh. Her hips gyrated. The snakes clung to her flesh.

At the end of her act, she pranced—clothed in pasties, G-string, and snakes—down the steps, across the dining room, through the swinging doors, and into the kitchen. When I went in to order French fries from Uncle Norman, she was still there, standing under the fluorescent lights, the two snakes stretched out across the butcher block table. Norman tended a broiler, then turned to look at the snakes. Their scales were iridescent in the fluorescent light. Here, Tanya said, touch them. I ran my hand lightly over one snake's midsection. It was not scaly, not slimy. Cool and dry, the snake lay quietly before me.

On New Year's Eve 1966, I stood alone in the coatroom. Outside, the teenagers I admired were having parties in basements or vans parked along the beach, wearing torn jeans, keeping warm by dreaming up the Summer of Love. My parents were somewhere in the dark, inside the vast dining room or taking refuge out back, on the pool deck over Long Island Sound. The band played "Sing Sing Sing" and the customers, more than a hundred of them, formed a line, a long snaking line of people, hands on the hips of the person in front. The line bounced and

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gyrated among the tables and booths, around the stairs, up into the elevated tier of the back dining room. They wore cardboard hats—pointy gold and silver hats, fake fezzes with scalloped bands, glitter-covered tiaras. They wore leis of red, silver, and green, and clutched plastic horns or spinners, which they blew and spun like mechanical mating calls. They were crazed, circling the room like a wagon train. They danced and bumped to the heavy drum beat, then burst through the double doors to the kitchen, invading even the off-limits enclave of the club.

A lone man stepped up to my window. He staggered a bit, then leaned his elbows on my counter. Happy New Year, sweetheart, he said. His eyes were half closed, his lips puckered for a kiss. I stepped backward slowly, back into the row of coats. C'mere, he said, Come on. He opened his eyes. I stared at him, but didn't move.

Oh, he said, your tag. He fished in his pockets, pants then jacket, inside and out, then the chest pocket of his shirt. He slapped his chest and sides. Come bring me my hat, he said, it's New Year's Eve. He took out a ten dollar bill. The band stopped. A pause between songs. The undulating line must have remained in the kitchen; there was an eerie silence in the dining room. The man waved his money at me. And then I heard them, the crowd laughing and blowing horns, strange moose calls, as they moved from the kitchen to the bar and then headed for the lobby, passed my coatroom, gathered up the drunk man with them, and danced back into the dining room, full circle, as the band leader started the countdown, ten, nine, eight, seven . . . . The crowd shouted numbers along with him. When they reached one, he yelled Happy New Year. Horns blew, churners churned, bells rang. The band started up "Auld Lang Syne." Couples kissed, then ran to the pay phone to call the people they loved.

Just like that it was 1967. I stood in the hat checkroom alone.

The snake crawls, the man labors, the woman aches and desires. My stepfather's garden was a film noir set, an island of concrete reaching out over the beach, into Long Island Sound. These were the bodies: the dancers' barely clothed bodies up on the stage gazed upon by anyone who could afford a nice suit, a full bottle of good Scotch, and a date in fur and sequins; the fifth grader's fully clothed body surreptitiously touched under the

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reading table by a popular teacher; the child's bare arm grabbed in the night by a stepfather intent on moral lessons; the first man's and first woman's bodies concealed from each other and even from their maker; the customers' bodies covered in suits and fur; the girl's body pressing back into the depths of the hat checkroom, away from the proffered kiss of a drunken man; and even a Barbie doll's molded plastic form beaten by her drunken boyfriend. Bodies to be exposed or concealed, bodies to be caressed or molested, women's bodies steeped in desire or calling it forth from the men. I asked Kirdy about the club, some amorphously phrased moral question. It's the customers, he said, I only give them what they want.

The money came from the men's pockets, a thick fold of bills held together with a clip. The women stood high up on the stage, making everyone look. At the end of the night Kirdy gave them some of those dollar bills. Did they undress to make the men look or did the men and their money make them undress? Did Barbie draw Ken's wrath—and I Uncle Norman's—or did Uncle Norman as Ken produce it on his own? Did something in our bodies make Mr. K. run his fingers along our legs or did he decide to do it on his own? Perhaps there was a simple answer, someone standing behind the curtain like the Wizard of Oz, a powerful booming voice fooling everyone until the curtain drew back and we looked behind the curtain. I tried for a moment to look behind the curtain. But I was only ten.

I tried to imagine Barbie at the club. But at The Emerald Room, the fine nuances of clothing (a color, a texture, a cut) and the fine nuances of the body (a curve, a walk, a glance) seemed to take on subtle meanings. You could risk getting it wrong. Or you could stand back, keep quiet, watch. I crossed East Broadway as if it were a wide and dangerous moat, entered the great stucco club set up on its concrete island. There, with her idealized woman's body, Barbie's directions seemed all wrong: Dressing her from the feet up like a real model was somehow moving in the wrong direction; her velvet and satin dress seemed destined for more than a quiet evening with Ken. It called for touching, for swift removal. And so Barbie stayed home in her Dream House, in my lavender room, world of my childhood. I took my place behind the counter at The Emerald Room, in the shadowed recesses of the hat checkroom among the furs, beyond the touch

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of the men. At school I tried to sit at the far end of the reading table. And soon I put Barbie away for good.

By 1970, urban renewal swept closer and the neighborhood began collapsing around us. Tourist strips like ours—designed on a small scale after Coney Island or Atlantic City—turned into homes for the dregs. Street people with vaguely biblical names—The Cat Lady, Jimmy the Fisherman, Junkyard Ruthie—walked the streets and slept in alleys, abandoned buildings, on the sand, or in corners of garages for a few dollars' rent. Gone were my grandmother's house, the amusement park out back, the church, the neighborhood. The great old expanse of East Broadway was obliterated with sand, dirt, and rocks. The neighborhood gone, the rides and boardwalk and hot-dog stands torn down, summer people stopped coming to the beach. The Emerald Room remained just outside the wrecking ball's arc, tucked away behind a row of old apartments and St. Gabriel's Roman Catholic Church. The years passed in a blur of drinks, stage lights perpetually dimming. Rivers from upper New England carried layers of waste; chemical sediments lined the shores and decimated shellfish beds. Waves eroded the beach. Disco—not burlesque—drew crowds, and as the regulars grew older, died, or moved away, no young people replaced them. Old soldiers faded away, and 1945 became a distant memory culled from the movies.

Day by day our world disintegrated. Kirdy hired Charlie Pride for a concert, and advertised on a local country radio station, but admission fees didn't add up. Kirdy asked my cousins and me how to decorate for teenagers, how to attract them, and in spite of our shrugs tried "splash parties"—rock bands out by the pool. But like the country music crowd, teenagers spent little money. And both crowds lacked the glamour of burlesque. Drinks fanned out on Kirdy's table. Thick tongued, he descended into reminiscence: The night Don Rickles imitated the way he and his brother walked, head down, pacing round and round the stage, yelling out, I'm looking for money, looking for money. The night Christine Jorgensen undressed behind her scrim, reading poetry while slowly shedding her clothes.

By the time I turned twenty, the men at the bar trembled before taking the morning's first drink. Old enough to serve liquor, I

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worked the bar on summer days. In the dark smoky room, cut off from the salt air, the waves, the town, I walked among the tables setting down shots. Send one to Kirdy, the regulars said, and I placed before him a shot of J & B and a short glass of Schlitz. White paint peeled from stucco. The rooms upstairs—where entertainers once changed and slept, where summer people rented all season—stood empty. Even dear old Miss Spooner at last stopped coming. No more Miss Spooner from somewhere up north arriving for her summer therapeutic holiday to hobble down the back stairs, black orthopedic shoes left at the landing as she swam the length of the pool or walked with her stark white, overly arched feet in the warm sands. The rooms became a refuge for people just a step away from a night on the sand or the shelter of an abandoned car. The carpets tore. They smelled of mold and ammonia. In the cool green bar, smoke residue settled on the mirrors and tinted windows. "Gents" faded from the men's room door. Vinyl ripped from the chairs. I'd sit in the bar waiting for customers, looking out the tinted glass front door into the empty parking lot.

In 1979, Kirdy ran his last burlesque show for a small, aging audience. Hat check girls were no longer useful: customers draped shabby cloth coats over empty chairs, men no longer wore hats. I raced among the tables, balancing the plates of steaks and lobster tails that lined my arms or holding a tray of drinks above my head. Soon, gale-force winds lifted waves above the sea wall, up over the pool, across the deck to batter the glass doors of the dining room. Water seeped in beneath the doors, warping the linoleum, breaking the stage. Instead of shopping for lobsters and beef each Saturday morning, Kirdy went to auctions and flea markets on Sundays, departing before 6:00 A.M. He pushed aside the dining room tables and chairs and piled up bargains until the dining room looked like his own private flea market: glass tables, floor lamps, jars and bowls, bright kitschy paintings, wrought iron lawn furniture, a stool with goat's feet, little demon stool.

Nearly a decade later, in the beginning stages of lung cancer, Kirdy finally relinquished his share of the business—what was left of it—to his brother's son. Vandals shattered windows, entered the building, tore down mirrors and doors. Kirdy suffered through a long illness and died. He began to haunt my dreams. I'd hear his disembodied voice calling my name or see him over

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my shoulder, in my peripheral vision, or sitting in a chair at the far edge of a room. The men upstairs grew older, seedier. Cats lived among the wreckage in the dining room. Norman, still clinging to what was left of The Emerald Room, rented a small apartment at the edge of the parking lot, watched the building, fed a black and white cat named Sylvester. Schylveschter, he'd call in falsetto, forcing a lateral lisp.

In 1995, I walked through the old club with Norman, looking for a memento. Everything of value was gone. The nephew had taken old neon signs and painted out Kirdy's name. White porcelain dishes, ringed in green, lay in shards. My wooden hangers were gone. Up high in a corner I saw a stylized letter "E" for Emerald Room, a speaker cover Kirdy and his brother had made by hand. Norman, overweight and limping, wearing a frayed cotton shirt and old cut-off chinos, climbed a shaky ladder to cut down the speaker. For nearly an hour, he labored with wire cutters and pliers until the speaker came down in a shower of plaster and sheet rock, nearly knocking him from the ladder.

For a few more months, The Emerald Room stood alone. And then the backhoes came. My mother sent me the local newspaper which had printed the story: last of the shore blight to be removed. Thank God, people told reporters. You'd think God drove the backhoes, I told friends. The same year 42nd Street in New York was renovated—turned from a strip of sex shows to a boulevard of canned family entertainment—on a cold foggy morning in early spring, The Emerald Room was knocked to the ground and the pieces carted off.

My mother, who still lived in the renovated house about a mile away, saw the cranes rise up from the fog as she took a daily walk along the beach. She walked closer and saw the metal ball swinging to and fro, smashing the walls. The Emerald Room fell in upon itself. The hotel on the top floor landed in the dining room, crushing the emerald chairs, the hydraulic stage, the little goat-legged stool.

What was it like, I asked her, when she called to give me the news. Oh, it was nothing, she said, I remember it like it used to be, not what it had become. Then she paused. After a long silence she added that it was decimated as a corpse, and with all its sadness, she could accept its passing as a relief.

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The summer of 1996, I return to stand on the wreckage of The Emerald Room. I walk across the parking lot from Norman's broken-down apartment. Don't go, he says. I step over mounds of dirt and concrete, walk back to the pool, look down at the waves, at the rusted rods protruding from the concrete island that Kirdy and his brother never finished extending. I look down at the old filter cover, the dead cat, the remains. A few days later, in a dream, Kirdy arrives for a picnic. Seven years after his death, it is the last time he appears in my dreams. We drive to the rubble with my half sister in the old blue LTD Kirdy bought her when she turned sixteen. She parks the car at the side of a mound, two wheels raised up on the dirt. The car tips over, but Kirdy, stronger in death than in life, lifts it up, moves it to a flat spot across the lot, and sets it on its tires. My sister and I spread out a crisp white tablecloth for the picnic. Where was the dining room? I ask. I don't know, he says, I can't remember.

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GARY KRIST

An Unsheltered Island

Someone once told her that white is the color of mourning in China. Sally remembers this as she sits on the rear deck of the Cheung Chau ferry, her luggage fanned out at her feet. Nearly everything within her vision is one harsh shade of white or another—the vast, undifferentiated sky, the ferry's glossy decks, even the glinting membrane of water below. It's all washed in a hot milky haze, a blank, light-scattering whiteness without shadows or contrast. Sally reaches into the external pocket of her carryon and pulls out a pair of green-lensed sunglasses. Mata Hari, she thinks idly, slipping the glasses onto the bridge of her nose. As if Mata Hari ever wore a three-dollar pair of sunglasses.

Sally looks out over the water, at the gulls hovering easily behind the stern. They too are white, though a cooler shade now that she's looking through tinted lenses. A wobbly V of foam opens out behind the ferry, leading back toward Hong Kong Island.

The color of mourning. It was Hogan who told her that. Years ago, when they were on assignment in Beijing together. She remembers being intrigued by the notion at the time. China, it seemed, truly *was* the other side of the planet, the mirror in which everything was reversed—white and black, happiness and sadness. Remembering this now, while sitting on the Cheung Chau ferry, she decides that if and when she ever gets married again, if and when she ever resurrects the ivory-toned dress her mother has just packed away into the cedar closet of the house in Maryland, she'll think of a Chinese funeral. It will be her private little joke on her mother—and on her second husband, whoever he might be.

The ferry's horn lets out a flat, thunderous bleat. A fan-sailed junk—the perfect visual cliché—passes on the port side, laundry and cooking pots hanging from every inch. Instinctively, Sally reaches for her camera bag, but stops herself. The image is too obvious—the kind of photograph that Hogan wouldn't even

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dream of shooting. But then, Hogan can afford to have high aesthetic standards. Changing her mind again, she reaches for the bag. But it's too late; the junk has already moved off. "Typical," she says aloud, watching its skewed gray form disappear into the haze.

She looks at her watch. The ferry should be arriving soon. Hogan and Sanjiv should be at the dock, waiting for her. She wonders how Hogan will behave toward her. Sally can never predict how people will react to her nowadays, two months after the tragic farce of her eight-month marriage. Some of her friends have commiserated, some have pitied her, some have acted as if the less said about such a mortifying mistake the better. And Hogan has always been unpredictable. When he and Sally were in Beijing together, covering the student demonstrations (he for *Newsweek*, she for the *Baltimore Sun*), Hogan constantly amazed her with his mercurial changes of mood. At one moment, he could be callous and mean-spirited, berating cab drivers, waiters, and photo assistants, embarrassing her just to be seen with him. But he could also be compassionate, generous—and remarkably vulnerable to sentimentality. Once she had to restrain him physically from giving the entire contents of his wallet to a self-professed student radical whose poverty seemed, at least to Sally, suspiciously picturesque. Would Hogan—dear, sloppy, Midas-fingered Hogan—find Sally as heartily ridiculous in her current situation as she found herself? Especially after he hears the other part of her news, the part she's told no one yet—that she is four months pregnant with her soon-to-be-ex-husband's baby, and that she has come to Hong Kong, to Hogan, to decide what to do about it?

Another rude blast from the ferry's horn. An island—probably Cheung Chau itself, judging by the schedule—has appeared out of the mist on the port side of the boat. After the hivelike congestion of Hong Kong, the island looks downright pastoral. All Sally can see is a small, humpbacked hill, dense with vegetation, cobbled with huge, almost blue boulders.

The ferry veers to the left, tracing the rounded shoreline of the island. People have begun streaming onto the deck from inside, rushing to the railings to look out at the approaching harbor. Two old women with plastic bags full of vegetables push their way in front of Sally's bench, blocking her view. Exasperated, Sally

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rises to her feet so she can see over their gray, hair-pinned heads. The ferry is now steering between two long stone breakwaters, turning into a harbor studded with wooden houseboats, barges, sleek pleasure boats, and squat, two-toned cargo ships—all of them dwarfed by the enormous ferry. Beyond the crisscrossing masts, she can see a dun-colored sea wall and, above that, the jumble of low, pale buildings that crowd the busy harbor.

With a majestic indifference, the ferry cruises past the smaller craft toward its docking place near the middle of the sea wall. As it pulls up beside the two-storied pier, passengers leave the railings and rush toward the exits, shouting noisily to each other. Sally keeps her seat for a few minutes while the boat empties. *Having brought along her cameras and some lighting equipment,* she doesn't want to struggle with crowds and her substantial cargo of luggage at the same time. Especially not in what her mother would undoubtedly call her "present condition."

Finally, after the last passenger has disappeared down the clanging metal stairway, Sally hoists her bags. She maneuvers through a doorway and down the stairway to the exit level. A young, rail-thin Chinese sailor rushes forward to help her across the metal gangway, but he leaves her abruptly on the other side. Sally sighs and heads down the creaky corridor toward shore, a tripod bouncing painfully on her hip.

She emerges from the enclosed pier onto a small paved plaza. There are people moving busily this way and that, steering around huge puddles of dark, foul-smelling water. Wooden stands and carts are set up all across the open area, crammed between ice-filled crates of fish, eels, and vegetables, boxes of plastic toys, cartons of potato chips and gum. The air—about ten degrees hotter now that she's off the water—smells thickly of fish and diesel.

Sally puts down her bags and peers into the crowds. Hogan, damn him, is nowhere in sight. She surveys the plaza in search of him. Several people—older, stoop-shouldered Chinese women—eye her from a nearby noodle stall. One of them points at her blatantly, shouting something to her companions in harsh Cantonese. Sally pretends not to notice at first, but then, changing her mind, stares back at them, locking eyes with the one who spoke. She wishes she knew enough Cantonese to shout back at

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them: "Yes, yes, an unaccompanied *gwailo* woman. And pregnant too. Aaaagh!"

At last, Sally catches sight of Hogan's large, ursine, unmistakably Caucasian form. He's making his way through the milling crowds, his dirty blond hair and mustache damp with sweat. "Sal!" he shouts, waving to her. She returns the wave, and suddenly he's got her, his arms are squeezing her, pinning her bags to her body. "I totally forgot the time," he says into her ear. "I ran the entire fucking way."

"It's okay," she says, wondering if she can possibly smell as rank as he does. He lets her untangle herself from her bags and then hugs her again. Sally can feel that he's lost weight since she last saw him, two years ago in New York. The tails of his sweat-soiled cotton shirt have escaped from his loose-fitting waistband. He looks great.

"So where's Sanjiv?" she asks him. Sanjiv, Hogan's lover for the past five years, is notoriously elusive. In fact, if Sally hadn't met him—once, at dinner, on a brief stopover in New York when Hogan and Sanjiv were heading to Europe—she might actually doubt his existence.

"Back home with his parents in Madras. Some family business to take care of."

"Too bad," Sally says, though she is secretly relieved to have Hogan to herself.

"You have any trouble getting here?" he asks. "I should've met you at the hotel in town. This is a shitload to carry."

"I can get around, Hogan."

"I know, I know," he says then, enjoying her scolding. "But you're on my island now. On my island you don't carry a thing. I'll get one of these idle heathens to give us a hand."

"We can manage with the two of us, Hogan. Just find a cab."

"A cab! Ha!" Hogan is shaking his head. "No vehicular traffic on Cheung Chau, honey, doesn't your Fodor's tell you that? We'll have to commandeer one of these bastards with a wheelbarrow."

He turns away abruptly. Sally can't stop him. She can only watch in mortification as he harangues a couple of teenagers at a vegetable stall, enlisting them as the white woman's porters.

"And this is Sanjiv's study," Hogan says, leading her into a sunny, high-ceilinged room, swarming with dust motes. A beauti-

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ful Turkish rug—thick as a golfing green—lies across its polished plank floor. The tall, streaky windows look out on sun-dappled vegetation. "You'll be crashing here. The couch opens into a bed. And ignore those stains on the wall. Some fungus we can't get rid of. It's the fucking humidity."

"This is wonderful," Sally says, wandering around the room. "This whole place is wonderful. Christ, Hogan, you've gone *Metropolitan Home* on me." Sally, not one to gush over real estate usually, is genuinely impressed by the house. Its open, spacious rooms, its enormous kitchen, the deck overlooking a forested hillside and the water beyond—it all seems so perfect, the wall fungus notwithstanding, and so unlike Hogan. His apartment in Kowloon, she remembers, was a chaos of dust balls and dirty dishes, with light stands and cardboard boxes and old, curled-up contact sheets cluttering every corner.

"Pretty swank, huh?" Hogan says. He looks around as if he can't believe it himself. "It's all Sanjiv's doing. He just hired some dizzy Belgian woman to create the whole thing."

"You must be doing even better than I thought."

Hogan frowns dismissively. "It's mostly Sanjiv's family money."

Sally runs her hand along the curved back of a spindly teak armchair. "You're set, Hogan," she says. "A rich husband, a nice house. You're set for life."

Hogan doesn't meet her eye. "I've got beer in the fridge," he says then. "And there are these greasy crab things I got at the market. You hungry?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

Hogan takes her back to the kitchen and makes lunch. By the time he's finished, it's already too hot for the back deck, so they eat at the table in the dining area, just inside the sliding glass doors. Hogan has retrieved two iced mugs from the freezer and now keeps refilling hers, even though she's allowing herself only an occasional sip.

"So how do you like it out here?" she asks him. "It's a nice little boat ride."

"It's great, great. Sometimes it's a pain in the ass getting out here if I come in on a late flight, but other than that . . . ." He leans forward with the large bottle of beer again. "Tell you one thing, though, this island's becoming a friggin' *gwailo* ghetto. Every piece of Eurotrash in Hong Kong has washed up here.

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Some mornings that ferry you were on looks like a goddamn commuter train from Luton."

Sally laughs. She picks at a wedge of crab toast with her fork. The entire house seems to hum with air conditioning.

"So," Hogan says then, "were you able to line up any assignments? Or will this just be a social visit?"

"Nothing specific," she says, looking away, not ready yet to talk about her real reason for coming. "Stock shooting, mostly. I figure there'll be plenty of call for 'The New Chinese Era in Hong Kong' stuff. Even though the place looks exactly the same as it used to." She turns back to him. "Mostly, I came to see you. I was hoping you'd make me some of your famous fish-flavored congee. They say it cures all ills."

"Almost all." He picks up her hand from the tabletop and brings it to his lips. Instead of kissing it, however, he licks it, wetting the back of her fingers with his rough tongue. The sensation is eerie, intimate. Sally, oddly, finds herself wanting him to do it again. "So, will you sleep with me this time?" he asks.

"Asshole," Sally answers, pulling her hand away. It's the question Hogan has been asking her for years, ever since they met. The first time he asked it, they were sitting in the pseudo-English pub in the Jianguo Hotel in Beijing, eating pizza. The question had thrown her for a moment. She knew—everyone in the photo world knew—all about the famous Hogan Dietrich's sexual preferences. But there he was, asking her to sleep with him. She couldn't tell at the time if he was serious. Come to think of it, she still can't.

"Why not?" he says then in a different voice. "You're available again."

"Damaged goods, Hogan. You can do better."

Hogan smiles grimly. "No pencil-dicked jerk can damage a classy piece of goods like you," he says, with heartening earnestness.

"You never even met him, Hogan."

"I don't have to meet him. He's a pencil-dicked jerk, *a priori.*"

Sally smiles. "Thanks," she says.

"The divorce official yet?"

"No, no. Too soon for that." She looks over at the orange and azure rug in the living room, its pattern of stylized eyes and scorpion tails. "It still hasn't sunk in, really. I hadn't even gotten

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used to having a husband, and now I'm supposed to deal with a hostile ex." Sally knows this is the time to tell Hogan about her pregnancy, but she can't—at least not yet. Everything seems to be going so well for Hogan—his career, his love life. She's afraid of infecting him with her bad luck.

Hogan takes a sip of his coffee. "We're all allowed a few mistakes," he says. Then, changing gears, he slaps his hands together. "Okay, hurry up and finish your lunch. There's this temple I want to show you. It's got the best name in Asia."

"The Temple of the Jade Vacuity?"

Hogan's face falls. "You *have* been reading Fodor's, damn you."

"Just the picture captions. Honest."

But Hogan pretends not to hear. "That's your trouble as a photojournalist, Sal. You read too fucking much." He comes up behind her and takes a handful of her dark hair into his hands. "I've always said that ignorance makes the best pictures. Just jump in and shoot like a fucking maniac."

He spins her around in the swivel chair and sinks to a crouch in front of her. Smiling, he stares into her eyes, his own pale blue eyes inquisitive and intense, and for a moment Sally is uncertain what to do or say. Hogan seems to be expecting something of her.

"Fuck, I'm glad you're here," he says finally. He leans forward and puts his head in her lap, his hot cheek resting against her thighs.

Sally is looking out through the glass doors to the deck, at the channel gleaming far below. "I'm glad you're glad," she says quietly, lacing her fingers through his damp, tangled hair.

That afternoon they visit the Temple of the Jade Vacuity. The building itself is not very photogenic, but Sally gets a few decent shots of some older men sitting outside, playing mahjongg. Hogan, she notices, politely looks the other way whenever she takes a picture, as if reluctant to make her self-conscious. Another difference between him and her: Hogan never takes a camera with him unless he's specifically on assignment.

Afterwards, they have a snack at a noodle shop and then tour the rest of the island. Hogan leads her through the noisy, narrow alleys of Cheung Chau town, past the boat-building docks, along Tung Wan Beach, and up into the hills to a radar station with a view of the West Lamma Channel, speckled with islands and

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boats. At the top, they sit on the hot grass and watch the boat traffic go by on the channel. That's when Hogan finally brings the topic around again to Sally's marriage.

"It was ridiculous, of course," she tells him, sitting cross-legged and pulling weeds from the thatchlike grass. "We had no business getting married. We'd known each other for less than six months."

"So why'd you do it?" Hogan asks. A simple question.

Sally looks at him. "Because I'm thirty-eight years old, Hogan. I'm lonely. I wanted to move out of my loft and start a real life. Banal but true."

"Not banal," he says. He puts his blunt-fingered hand on the nape of her hot neck. "Not banal at all."

"I'm a coward, Hogan," she says then, turning her head away from him. "My career is going nowhere and I thought this might be an easy way out. You wouldn't know about that. You're a star. Editors fall all over each other to get you to work for them." She turns back to him. Suddenly, she feels angry at Hogan, and disgusted with herself for feeling angry. "And on top of it all, you've got Sanjiv."

Hogan pulls her head to his chest. She can smell his sweat—acrid but comforting somehow. "You're not a coward," he says.

They sit for a few minutes in silence, watching the approach of another ferry from Hong Kong Island. Again, Sally knows she should tell Hogan about her pregnancy, and tell him about her problem—that she's too scared to have the baby and too scared to abort it. But she worries about making herself even more pitiful in his eyes.

After a few more awkward minutes, they walk back to the house. "I'm going to sleep for a while," Sally says, happy to be back in the luxuriant chill of air conditioning. It's 4:30—the middle of the night, New York time—and her body has simply given out.

"Wake you for dinner?" Hogan asks.

"You know I won't sleep through dinner," she answers, too tired to make more of a joke than that.

She excuses herself, retires to the sofa bed in her room, and sleeps for several hours, dreaming of big, soft, powder-white babies and nothing else.

It's twilight when she wakes. For a moment, she can't locate herself. The dim light leaking into the windows casts a bizarre

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amber glow over everything—bookshelves, strange furniture. Sally sits up, and suddenly she remembers. Sanjiv's study. Her sanctuary in the House of Hogan.

Sally gets up from the bed slowly, feeling queasy. She pads barefoot across the room to the dark mahogany desk. There is a framed picture of two men—Hogan and Sanjiv—propped up against a small brass lamp. She picks it up and examines it. It's a gorgeous black-and-white shot of them standing in front of a house, this house. Hogan, looking fatter but better kempt than he is now, has an arm carelessly thrown over Sanjiv's shoulder. Sanjiv looks very young. His face, the features almost unbelievably refined, is smooth, elegant, accessible. He is quite overweight. He *is a beautiful husband.*

Sally puts the picture back and turns away from the desk, vaguely ashamed of feeling sorry for herself, even in private. She slips into her shoes. Checking herself briefly in the mirror, she runs her fingers roughly through her hair and then heads out into the living room. The rest of the big house is dark, but through the glass doors Sally can see Hogan sitting on the deck. He's talking with someone—a slim, fortyish man with wire-rimmed glasses and blond, strawlike hair. She steps to the doors and slides one open.

"Sal!" Hogan shouts. He sits slumped over in the wrought-iron chair like an apathetic fifth-grader. "Someone I want you to meet."

Sally walks out to them. The other man rises as she comes.

Hogan introduces them. "Ian Cook, my next-door neighbor and financial advisor. Sally Macmillan, my soul mate and main competitor in the dog-eat-dog world of photojournalism."

Ian shakes her hand, smiling warmly. "Very pleased to meet you," he says, in the rich English tones she assumes must be a "public-school accent." "But Hogan flatters me," he continues. "I'm hardly his financial advisor."

Sally nods. "Well, I'm hardly his main competitor, so he flatters us both."

"Have a seat, honey," Hogan says, patting the chair next to him. "But first get yourself a drink. You can't sit out here at sunset unless you've got a drink."

Ian holds up an empty glass. "What can I get you?"

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"What's the house drink?" There's always a house drink in the House of Hogan.

"We're all drinking gin gimlets these days. Hogan found a place in the market that sells Rose's Lime Juice for virtually nothing."

Sally knows she should not be drinking. "A gimlet it is, then," she says. "Not too strong. I'm already groggy enough."

Ian disappears into the house. Hogan again pats the chair beside him. "Sit."

She does. She looks out toward the water below, visible through a break in the dense, almost tropical undergrowth. Little coins of light dance on the surface, lemon-yellow and bright. "It's beautiful out here," she says. "You don't deserve a view like this."

Hogan acknowledges the justice of this with a nod. "This deck is where I live, from an hour before sunset until bed." He takes a listless sip of his drink. It's clearly not his first of the evening. "I bought a cell phone like everybody else in Hong Kong, but I only use it here, so I don't even have to go inside to answer a fucking phone call. This deck is why we bought the house in the first place."

Sally hears the susurrant hiss of the glass door sliding open behind them. "Look what I've found snooping around the front garden," says Ian, drinks in hand. Behind him are two tallish women, both with dark bobbed hair. Both are wearing baggy shorts and loose-fitting sleeveless T-shirts.

"Oh Christ," Hogan mutters. "It's the lesbians from down the block. They must have smelled the gin."

"Quiet, Hogan, she'll *believe* you," one of them says. She steps over to Hogan and gives him a kiss on the top of the head. "You must be Sally," she says, extending a hand. "I'm Beth. And this is my sister Ann. We live down the path."

"Her *younger* sister Ann," says the other one, pointedly not kissing Hogan's head or shaking Sally's hand. The two sisters look very much alike, except that Ann's nose is longer, her chin more pointed, like a cartoonist's exaggeration of Beth's face. They, too, have accents—Australian, Sally guesses. She remembers what Hogan said earlier about a "*gwailo* ghetto."

"But Hogan was half-right about us," Beth continues. "We *did* smell the gin. Anyone else for a drink?"

"I'll take a fizzy water, please," Ann replies, sinking into Ian's chair.

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"Sally and I are set," Ian says. He hands Sally a pale green drink and then stands beside her chair, like an attendant.

"So you arrived this morning from New York?" Ann asks.

"Yesterday, actually. I spent last night in the city and then came out on the ferry this morning."

"I took her to Leung's for noodles," Hogan interjects.

"And she survived. Miraculous."

"Leung was asking about you and Beth. Bastard says he wants his radio back."

Ann leans forward suddenly like a riled animal. "It's not Leung's radio! It's ours. He *gave* it to us!"

Hogan shrugs. "He says you borrowed it."

"He was drunk," Ann says. "Or else Beth was. She was the one who talked to him."

"To whom?" asks Beth. She has appeared on the deck again with a full glass in each hand.

"Leung," Hogan tells her, delighted to be stirring up trouble. "About the radio."

Ann takes one of the drinks from her sister. "He claims we've *stolen* it."

"Borrowed," Hogan corrects.

"What radio?" Beth asks, bewildered. "And by the way, Hogan, you're out of lemons."

Over the next half hour—as the sun sets spectacularly, all golds and oranges—several more of Hogan's friends show up: an older American woman who works for a bank, an Italian man who writes mystery novels, another Italian man who doesn't seem to do much of anything. Then, finally, Harry Leung himself appears on the deck. Sally recognizes him from the noodle shop that afternoon. He is a tall, exquisitely handsome man with flawless tawny skin and a heavy Cantonese accent. He wears pressed chinos and a spotless white shirt turned up to reveal shapely forearms.

"Harry, darling!" Ann says, rising from her chair and running over to kiss him on the cheek.

Sally looks down into her drink and takes a deep breath.

"Are you all right?" asks a voice beside her. It's Ian. He has reclaimed the chair next to hers. There's something intimate and secretive about his voice—he's speaking softly, under the muffled background of other voices.

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"Oh, it's just that I miss having a circle of friends," she says in reply, lying. "In New York, I usually see my friends one at a time—and then only with days of advance planning. And they're all photographers. What we do when we get together is gripe about editors."

Ian nods. He puts his damp glass up to his cheek and rolls it against the pale skin. Though the sun is fully set now, the air is still warm, and almost unbearably humid, particularly with the radiant heat of a dozen people. "Before moving here, I lived in a high-rise apartment building on Hong Kong Island," he says. "It was much the same thing there. Nobody ever just dropped in. Maybe it's the looser atmosphere out here. Or maybe everyone's just nervous about the new government. We're banding together for protection. We're just an unsheltered little island, after all."

"No one here seems very bothered," Sally observes. She's noticed this fact ever since arriving in Hong Kong.

"Oh, don't be deceived. We're all scared out of our wits." He pulls his chair closer to hers. "Especially Harry Leung, naturally. Along with all the other Hong Kong natives, the ones with businesses and family ties here. The rest of us can just leave if things get dicey. Though I hear Harry's gotten himself a Singaporean passport."

"Do you think the Communists will tighten the screws on everyone here?"

"I'm bloody sure of it."

"Oh," Sally blurts stupidly, not expecting this answer. She turns and looks back at Hogan sitting at the other end of the deck. He's switched to beer now, and is pointing the long neck of a bottle at Harry Leung and another man, who are both leaning against the wooden railing. They are smiling indulgently down at Hogan, as if he were a very witty paraplegic in a wheelchair.

She can sense Ian watching her from his place beside her. Suddenly, she feels a surge of panic erupting in her chest. Her heart beats frantically, and cold sweat starts trickling down her ribs. "Excuse me a second," she says breathlessly, rising, barely looking back at him. She slips past a few people and reenters the coolness of the house, which is now almost completely dark except for the amber light in the kitchen. Moving clumsily down the corridor, she finally reaches the bathroom, clicks on the light, and shuts the door behind her. Gasping for air, she catches a

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glimpse of herself in the mirror. She looks horrible. There are deep gray rings beneath her eyes, and her mouth seems drawn and tight. She watches herself, trying to fend off the terror that grips her.

After a few minutes, the attack passes. Her breathing returns to normal, and the band of tightness around her chest loosens. She runs the faucet and quickly splashes a few handfuls of water over her face. It was a relatively mild attack this time. She's been having them periodically for several months now, though she's told no one about them, not even her mother. Another of Sally's secrets. She knows she should be seeing someone about them—a shrink, maybe, or at least her gynecologist.

Sally dries her face on a maroon terry-cloth towel. She puts her hand on her belly, over the developing child inside. Her pregnancy will be obvious soon.

Breathing normally again, she looks at herself in the mirror a last time and turns out the light.

She's halfway back to the deck when she stops. Listening to the jumble of muffled voices from outside, she tells herself that no one will miss her for a few extra minutes. She needs some air, some real air. So she turns and heads out the front door into the heat.

The narrow walkway outside Hogan's house is jungle-like in the humid night. Great black banks of vegetation crowd the pavement from all sides. A fine haze, humming with unseen insects, hangs motionless. It forms vague haloes around the lights of the houses lining the walking path.

She stands on the pavement, momentarily uncertain which way to go to get to Tung Wan Beach. Her thoughts are sluggish, her mind clotted. She really does need air, she tells herself. Finally, realizing that she must go downhill to reach the water, she turns left. She heads down the winding walkway, through the overhanging trees that resound with the pervasive drone of air conditioners.

After a few minutes of wandering, she passes a small hotel. She can hear the faint lap of the waves. Rounding a corner, she finally sees the dirty strip of beach, irregularly lighted by spotlights from the buildings behind it. Feeling relieved, Sally steps down off the cement embankment onto the sand. She considers taking off her shoes, but the sand is littered with shattered pieces of wood,

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broken bottles, and all sorts of unidentifiable shards of plastic. Moving closer to the water, she finds a relatively clean place and sits down, feeling the sand give generously beneath her.

Sally takes a deep, deliberate breath. The beach is empty around her except for a few boys playing about a hundred yards down the beach. Their silhouetted forms bounce gracefully near the edge of the water.

It's going to be all right, she tells herself. Everything is going to be all right.

She looks down the beach at the children. They are silent now, stooping over something at the water's edge. It seems to be a black hump, half-immersed in the water. Sally watches as the hump resolves itself into something recognizable—a large sea turtle, struggling out of the water. Several of the boys step back, and one breaks from the pack and runs away. Interested, Sally gets to her feet, brushes sand from herself, and starts walking.

The turtle is halfway up the beach by the time she reaches it. The boys dance around it, making the jangled music of their language as they poke it and toss sand at its tough bald head. The turtle, ancient-looking and oblivious, merely pulls itself further along. The creature moves with a kind of prehistoric slowness, and a deliberation that suggests either great wisdom or great stupidity.

Sally sinks to a crouch to touch the damp, sandy shell. One of the boys leans toward her and shakes his open hand in front of her face. "No," he says harshly.

Sally pulls her hand back as if burned. Does the boy know something that she doesn't, some reason not to touch this animal? She remembers something she has read—that turtles carry trichinosis. Or is that only the small ones, the ones people used to keep as pets?

The turtle, seemingly impervious to any distraction, has begun digging in the sand, throwing sprays of it backwards with its clumsy flippers. The boys giggle, dodging away from the flying sand. Of course, Sally tells herself then. The thing is digging a nest; it's probably aching with eggs.

A boy—the one she saw running from the beach before—returns with two older men. One of the men has a long, thick knife, the blade reflecting the spotlights. Sally is afraid for a moment that the man intends to cut the turtle's throat with the

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knife, but he seems to have other plans. He waves the blade in front of the boys to keep them back, then turns to the other man and says something that makes him bark in laughter.

The turtle continues digging among the erratic shadows of the onlookers. More people arrive, crowding around, jostling Sally to one side. She is annoyed, but mesmerized by the turtle's performance. It has already dug a deep hole. Now, with the same deliberateness, it rouses itself out and positions its hindquarters over the hole. The creature is breathing heavily, sighing with an almost human-sounding sorrow.

The first egg is produced. Murmurs rise from the crowd as the leathery egg drops from the turtle's body into the hole. Then, the man with the knife falls to his knees. Using the knife as a shovel, he digs away more sand and takes the egg from its place. He holds it up to the crowd and then places it into a mesh bag that his friend is holding out for him.

Sally watches this with a feeling of mounting indignation. The man takes every egg produced by the turtle, sometimes not even waiting for it to drop, catching it as it falls. She wants to stop him, but of course she cannot, so she just watches, her tired body rigid with anger. Then, apparently impatient with the turtle's slowness, the man with the knife gets to his feet. He steps forward, straddling the turtle, and suddenly—so quickly that Sally hardly realizes what is happening—pulls back the beakish head and slits the turtle's throat. Air explodes from the severed windpipe like an enormous gasp. Sally lets out a cry and turns away. The crowd becomes more animated at the sight of blood. She is shoved aside, out of the circle of onlookers.

Turning, Sally begins to run. She heads back down the beach in the direction she has come from. More people are rushing toward her, toward the crowd behind her, shouting incomprehensibly. The spotlights catch their white shirts, making them seem to glow against the dark sand.

Sally is still feeling shaken when she reaches Hogan's house. Entering the front door, breaking into that block of cool air, she realizes that she's been away for over an hour. She worries that someone might have noticed her absence.

Ian is in the kitchen, washing glasses. "I'm glad you've come back," he says. "They're just putting Hogan to bed."

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"Is he so tired?" she asks shakily.

"Unconscious, actually."

Sally turns toward the glass doors just as Beth slides one open. "Be careful with him, now," Beth calls out. Beyond her, on the deck, Harry Leung and the Italian mystery writer have hoisted Hogan's bulk between them. They carry him along the deck by his armpits, the tips of his shoes dragging along the wooden boards. Hogan's head lolls from side to side. He is literally unconscious.

"Oh my God," Sally says.

Beth shakes her head. "He's all right. Don't fret."

"Bedroom," Leung says to the Italian, and they steer the body around the furniture in the living room. Sally follows them into the master bedroom, still half-believing that Hogan must be pretending. She's never known anyone to actually drink himself unconscious.

Leung and the Italian ease Hogan onto the unmade bed. Leung grabs a thin blanket from the corner and begins to spread it over him.

"Shouldn't we undress him or something?" Sally asks.

Leung crinkles his nose. "Not very appetizing thought," he says, smiling broadly.

"He will sleep now," adds the Italian, "clothes or no clothes."

They leave the bedroom. Sally lingers, looking at her friend's quietly sleeping form. She turns out the light and then heads back to the living room.

Leung is making himself a drink in the kitchen. Ian leans back against the sink, smoking a cigarette. People are back out on the deck, showing no signs of leaving.

Sally finds their unconcern exasperating. "What is *wrong* with all of you?" she practically shouts.

"Wrong?" Ian asks.

"Does this happen often?"

"Often enough."

"And that doesn't bother anyone?"

They all look at each other, seeming flustered by her vehemence. "If you think this is bad," Ian says, almost blithely, "you should see him the week before his chemotherapy."

The word takes a moment to register in Sally's mind. "Chemotherapy?" she asks weakly. She sinks into a chair. The panic starts

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creeping up on her again, but she refuses to give in to it. "Hogan's getting chemotherapy?"

"Oh dear," Ian says. "He hasn't told you yet."

"Cat's out of the bag now, Ian love," Beth says.

Sally gets to her feet. She pushes past Leung and the Italian man and runs down the hallway to the bedroom. Hogan is still lying there, motionless in the shadowy dark, the blanket twisted around his legs. Sally goes to the bed, sits on the edge, and starts shaking him. "Wake up, Hogan," she pleads. "Wake up!"

When he doesn't stir, she shakes him harder, snapping his neck back. "Damn you, Hogan!" she shouts.

Finally, his eyes flutter open. They're bleary and bloodshot. He looks confused for a few seconds, then, recognizing her, he grins. "Sal," he says.

"You're sick, Hogan. You didn't tell me you were sick."

Hogan looks sheepish. "I was going to," he says slowly. His eyelids start drooping again. "I didn't want to worry you."

Sally stares at him as his eyes close again and he promptly falls asleep.

After a minute or so, she gets up and returns to the living room. The others have gone back out to the deck, but Ian is still standing there, holding out another gimlet.

Sally shakes her head, refusing the drink. "How long has he known?" she asks.

Ian shrugs. "About six months now. But you mustn't worry. The chemo is doing wonders, apparently. He'll probably live for years."

"What kind of cancer is it?" she asks, looking down toward the floor.

"Lung," he says. "The long-term prognosis, naturally, isn't good, but as I say, he's responding well to the therapy." Ian dips his head playfully to meet her averted gaze. "It's all right, you know. Life goes on."

Life goes on, Sally repeats to herself. Except when it doesn't go on. Except when it ends. "Do you always speak in clichés?" she asks then.

Ian seems unfazed by her rudeness. "When they're useful, yes," he says. He gestures toward the sliding doors. "Now, will you join us out on the deck, or would you prefer to lock yourself in your bedroom for the night?"

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Sally stares at him, stung by the sarcasm.

"All right, I'm obnoxious," he says. "But you provoked me. Now, will you *please* come out with us? We're busy planning a birthday party for Hogan next week, when Sanjiv gets back. You *did* know that Hogan will be forty-five on Wednesday, didn't you?"

Sally shakes her head. "No, I didn't."

"Well, now you know," Ian replies. "We're planning a big picnic up near the radar station and we can use your input. You seem to know what Hogan likes." He takes a few steps toward the deck, but then stops. "Coming?"

Sally doesn't know what to reply. She feels ragged, worn-out, pummeled by jet lag and sorrow and the brutal indifference she always senses in Hong Kong. And, of course, by her pregnancy. You're pregnant, she reminds herself then, as if she could ever have forgotten. There's a creature growing inside you. Something whose only purpose right now is to gather the strength it will need to push its way into existence.

"We have to decide on a menu," Ian says, prodding her.

Sally thinks of Hogan sleeping peacefully in the next room. He deserves a good party—the best they can throw him. "Okay," she says finally. She wipes the glaze of sweat from her forehead and follows Ian out to the deck.

The next morning, Sally wakes to a knock at the door of her room. Before she can reply, the heavy mahogany door swings open and Hogan walks in, looking hungover in the sunshine but cheerful. He's carrying a breakfast tray. "My famous fish-flavored congee," he says hoarsely. "I made it just for you." He puts the tray down on the desk beside the sofa bed and pushes the steaming bowl of porridge toward her.

She looks up at Hogan, who avoids her eye like someone caught in a minor but embarrassing lie. It's going to be quite a visit, she thinks. The two of them have lots to talk about. She wants Hogan to be the first to know about her decision—her foolish, impractical, irrational decision. Somehow, she knows he will approve.

"Go ahead," Hogan says, pointing toward the congee. "It's just like baby food."

She takes the bowl. "Just like baby food," she repeats, spooning the hot porridge hungrily into her mouth.

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HAYDEN CARRUTH

The Half-Acre of Millet

So green the leaves in late September sun
So glossy those dark spikes of seed
It lay between the potatoes and the orchard
It was a hunting ground for the milk snake
  that searched for shrews
"A tonic for the cows before they go into the barn
  for the long winter,"
Marshall said, and he would turn them into it
How they romped and snorted
And how they gorged on the sweetness
At last it was trampled and rubbled, the leaves and panicles
  and stalks were all eaten
Then a day or two later the cows went reluctantly
  to their stanchions
Into the dark muttering and complaining

Now I'm sickly and old and altogether somewhere else
Marshall is a voice from the darkness of history
I keep looking for my own half-acre of millet
  but I don't find it
They tell me millet doesn't grow around here.

In My Grandfather's Natural Voice: The Cape Cod Blues

Well, the wind from the ocean's a dark, dark wind
  and the ocean is dark as well
and the shrieks of the sea birds flying
  sound like the damned in hell
the houses are dark, the people dark
  the mussel dark in his shell

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the water that crawls on the strand is sighing
  a legend of torment to tell
and broken down in the little town
  a tower with a broken bell
is clanking a dire death-knell

Give me my upland forest
  with its ferny glen, its glade
of the hazelbloom in a dappled shade,
  where I and the earth-girl dwell.

Comrade Women—

you with hayseed in your hair and the sweat runneling
between your tits—to you I say, my dears—
but quietly and with my smallest smile—
never fear, we're going to do this job,
we're going to leave this field as clean and functional
and tidy as your grandmother's great four-posted
feather-bed in Beulah Land. And tonight
we'll wash our faces in the cool water of the common pool.

Burial Rites

Did anyone ever believe that the dead woman
they buried with a bone needle in her hand
would use it to sew a new jerkin in the country
beyond the moon? Or that the young man whose
mutilated corpse they placed on a shield would
wield it to defend himself? No, our forebears
were not so simple. They did these things without
expectation. They did them in despair.

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DANA GIOIA

My Dead Lover

How miserable we were together, dear,
When we were young and wanted to be perfect.
You never condescended to be happy.
You wanted ecstasy—or nothing at all.

Your body was the first I ever knew
Better than my own. Your hands the first
I could surrender to. My dreams still search
The narrow room we used each afternoon.
We locked the door, but sun slipped through the blinds,
And time crept closer, always keeping count.

And now you are nowhere. You are nothing,
Not even ashes. How very like you, love,
To slip away again so skillfully.
You didn't even leave behind a grave
Where I might lay a wreath of old regrets
Beside your name, knowing you wouldn't care.
You hated scenes, especially good-byes.

The people walking past me on the pier
Know nothing of you. They are the ghosts.
I lift a hand of earth into the wind.
I offer it instead of ashes.
It isn't you the wind takes grain by grain.
You're free of earth, of time, even free of me.

Our rituals are never for the dead.

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Unsaid

So much of what we live goes on inside—
The diaries of grief, the tongue-tied aches
Of unacknowledged love are no less real
For having passed unsaid. What we conceal
Is always more than what we dare confide.
Think of the letters that we write our dead.

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EMILY GROSHOLZ

The Abacus of Years

The bathroom shone; the bath was filled with toys
That whirred and paddled for the babies' pleasure.
The soap displayed itself in shells and roses.

The mirror's sheen awaited its erasure
By minor orchids of a small, splayed hand,
The humid whole notes of an embouchure

Where one narcissus leans to kiss its second.
The rugs were freshly vacuumed, and the curtains
Beaten like gold to sift the dusty sundown.

Who was the agent, whose the strict conditions
That left the house perfected everywhere?
The children hushed their voices at the entrance.

Flowers on the table, flowers on the ample bureau,
Linen plumped and crisp in the guest bedroom.
A great white Christmas tree beside the fire

Circled by costly presents, a queen's ransom.
Grandmothers the world over vex their children
By granting the least grandchild's fondest dream.

The pool was heated, all the palms bedizened
By strands of stars, the abacus of years
And light years, half-remembered, half-forgotten,

Counted and discounted, lost and near.
Dear Tess, how loyally the house still welcomes
Travellers weighed down with bags and worries,

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Children, principles, opinions, programs.
We miss the one whose absence still restores
This ordered disarray of empty rooms.

Old age is spendthrift; youth must count its treasure.
We miss the lavish habits of repose
Amidst our loud, unruly sons and daughters.

Finitude

Awake before dawn, William and I sit drowsing,
lapsed from a dream, louring toward consciousness,
nursing a little, musing, counting our toes.
There are always ten, no matter where we begin.
Oh, look. He suddenly points at the closed door-windows
that cast over snow, past spindly lank silhouettes
of maple, oak, black walnut, into the dawn.

On tiptoe, weaving, he runs up close to the windows
charmed by the panels of gold set high among mullions
of boles, the roses fastened in tracery-branches.
Yet how the fastening ravels: our matins are sung,
the windows beyond the windows wither away,
and then he returns to my arms asking his questions
in an ancient, unknown tongue. And all of my answers,
equally enigmatic, are kisses in shadow.

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Robbie and I Discover Painting

Our studio is a cave behind a green door
built into a hillside riveted by stairs
like the improbable door I entered once
to see the ochre creatures of Altamira
still breathless after thirty thousand years,
flanks heaving from the chase, restrained, elusive.
How that low plastic ceiling pressed them down
on every speechless tourist, every random
curvature of rock made flesh and bone
by some archaic brush, some vanished hand.

Now Robbie stands against his easel, speechless
before the depths of red, black's utter midnight.
He dips and stabs: the paper's whiteness fizzles.
His mark's the birth of a new star, a nova
blindingly there on nothing's facelessness
that also blinds. His mark is not a face,
more the proposal of his lust for pigment.
I think he wants to eat those ancient colors
warping the paper, glutting the stubby brush
suspended in his visible bright hand.

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JOHN HAINES

NEAR Travels Far to Find Eros

Sent into Space on a three-year journey
—gone now, never perhaps to be seen
again, never again to be welcomed,
to be touched and questioned.

What will we think of to say to those
still waiting, still searching the skies,
when the allotted years are up,
and NEAR is still far from its meeting—
Eros wandering alone in its orbit—
or crashed in that glittering company?

A year spent probing the stellar dust
for a secret buried underfoot in
the forest soil or fastened to a rock
—this broken shell, this stem
of a violet, this wind-blasted tree.

Another year, another comet sighted,
and always this blind human craving,
a search for what was left behind,
a satisfaction no longer to be found.

One more skilled adventure—whatever
it is that fuels the stalled machine
and sends the pilot on his starry quest;

whatever it is they hope to find
out there—an emptiness, a stillborn
terror, but it is not love.

1996

(Note: NEAR, first spacecraft to orbit an asteroid . . . Will take two years to reach Eros, then circle and study it for one year.)

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Snow

"In the gloom of whiteness,
In the great silence of snow . . ."

And that is how we remember it:
the flakes falling, drifting
into the noontime city air;
traffic stalled and offices closed,
a people grown suddenly quiet,
polite in their civic attention.

And strange on a following wind
a flock of seagulls driven inland,
stranded in the suburb trees,
but alert and quietly waiting,
watching for bread on the snow.

I think of the snow gone black
with coal dust in Ohio, brown
with volcanic silt in Anchorage.
Of the Washington Yard when we
were young, sledding the cobbles
downhill on a quiet Sunday.

And Edward Thomas, from whom
my quoted lines are taken, whose
child saw in the falling snow
the feathers of a white bird
killed on her nest, the shed down
failing in "that dusky brightness."

And now on the lakes and plains
the snow of another age is falling—
that laid-by dream of a continent
stilled under sleet and ice, enormous
ghost-herds ploughing the drifts.

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And once in Manhattan, when I was
a student, solitary, wandering
the Sunday silence of Wall Street,

a snowstorm that buried the city.

1997

The Ice Child

Cold for so long, unable to speak,
yet your mouth seems framed
on a cry, or a stifled question.

Who placed you here, and left you
to this lonely eternity of ash and ice,
and himself returned to the dust
fields, the church and the temple?

Was it God—the sun-god of the Incas,
the imperial god of the Spaniards?
Or only the priests of that god,
self-elected—voice of the volcano
that speaks once in a hundred years.

And I wonder, with your image before me,
what life might you have lived,
had you lived at all—whose companion,
whose love? To be perhaps no more
than a slave of that earthly master:

a jug of water on your shoulder,
year after stunted year, a bundle
of reeds and corn, kindling
for a fire on whose buried hearth?

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There were furies to be fed, then
as now: blood to fatten the sun,
a heart for the lightning to strike.

And now the furies walk the streets,
a swarm in the milling crowd.
They stand to the podium, speak
of their coming ascension . . .

Through all this drift and clamor
you have survived—in this cramped
and haunted effigy, another entry
on the historian's dated page.

Under the weight of this mountain—
once a god, now only restless stone,
we find your interrupted life,
placed here among the trilobites
and shells, so late unearthed.

1996

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ANTHONY HECHT

Long-Distance Vision

How small they look, those men way in the distance.
Somehow they seem scarcely to move at all,
And when they do it is slowly,
Almost unwillingly. I bend my head
To my writing, look up half an hour later,
And there they are, as if

Engaged in boring discussion, fixed in a world
Almost eventless, where it is somehow always
Three in the afternoon,
The best part of the day already wasted,
And nothing to do till it's time for the first drink
Of the uneventful evening.

I know, of course, binoculars would reveal
They are actually doing something—one doubles over,
(Is it with pain or laughter?)
Another hangs his jacket on the handle
Of his bicycle, tucks in his Versace sportshirt
And furtively checks his fly.

But the naked eyesight smoothes and simplifies,
And they stand as if awaiting the command
Of a photographer
Who, having lined them up in a formal group,
Will tell them to hold even stiller than they seem
Till he's ready to dismiss them.

In much the same way, from a palace window,
The king might have viewed a tiny, soundless crowd
On a far hill assembled,
Failing to see what a painter would have recorded:
A little crystal vase with one carnation
At the foot of the cross.

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MARK JARMAN

Cycle

1

Everything around the central meaning,
Whatever grips that something in the womb
And, when a door slams, looks as if it's leaning
From all the objects in a startled room;
Everything that passes through the puzzle
A spider glues together or is caught,
And bends the whisker back until the muzzle
Twitches, and tugs, then loosens the square knot;
Everything surrounding everything
That's going to happen, even the manger's planks,
The barn's stone lintels, poised as if to sing,
The angel choir of matter giving thanks;
And all that made the world seem passing strange:
Everything is about to know a change.

2

Everything is about to know a change,
For someone will appear and say a word,
And someone else will hear and rearrange
His life as no one ever thought he would.
And something like an earthquake or a storm
Will happen somewhere like a little town,
And that place, although nothing but a stem,
Will snap off and the tree will tumble down.
And the about-to-be, a secret cache,
Will smoulder like a spark inside a couch,
And those who sat in darkness, dropping ash,
Will see a great light. Everyone will touch

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And be touched by the change no one can stop.
A single leaf will speak. A voice will drop.

3

A voice will speak. A single leaf will drop.
And the whole tree will wither where it stands
And never bear again, though he could help,
As he has helped the withered bones of hands,
The corneas of clouded-over eyes,
The blood and breath of loved ones, dead and dying,
And even water, calming frantic seas,
And even water, turning it to wine.
The poor world must have fallen with the fall
For him to curse a fruit tree, out of season,
For giving nothing, like an unborn apple,
And then to make up, for some obscure reason,
A lesson on the power of faith and prayer.
Perhaps to understand, you had to be there.

4

Perhaps to understand you had to be
Alone with the absent presence he called father,
Alone with the dysfunctional family
Of stars and darkness, deaf and dumb together,
And in that interaction see a sign,
The way a bedside watcher will believe
A twitch or flicker—almost anything—
Is proof the injured sleeper will revive.
Perhaps to understand, you had to die,
Having acknowledged with your body's pain
That everybody does, unmythically,
Knowing only that it won't happen again,
And then to wake and find your death the proof
Of an abstraction that the world calls love.

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5

The abstraction that the world calls love
Appeared to grieving friends and cooked them food
And walked with them a way and let one shove
Fingers into his wounds and take a good
Look. And then he turned to wind and fire
And pieces of his clothes and eyelashes
And thorns and rusty nails and locks of hair
And red letters on a few translucent pages.
He took on flesh and then he took it off,
Or else he kept it for a souvenir,
Or else—but why keep going back and forth?
He dwelt among us, then he disappeared.
And we are left to be and keep on being,
Like everything around a central meaning.

Epistle I

All my concern is for what you will not give away, what you keep to yourself, withheld in your soul's shut and crowded closet. You have something in there, don't you?

If I appeared to you in dreams, either as myself, a capsule of ink, or something else, a pileated woodpecker or thick dust, you know you would wonder about it all day long. I want to know what I mean to you.

You would like to press your thumb into the sun's clay and the moon's plaster, you would like your voice to activate the summer night, you would like to harrow hell. I'm not saying you can't. But you need a good reason.

Compare the blueprint of the skull with the topology of heaven. God has a wonderful plan for your life. But which is it?

Consider the child who left a nickel on her brother's grave. She gave something she cared about, not everything she had.

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Given earth, air, water, fire, we return steel, steam, saliva, salt. Given flesh, we return waste. Given love . . . But let's be fair to ourselves. Given love, we return earth, air, water, fire, flesh.

But not everything, right? And even if we could give everything, our all, our entire reserve, the gross domestic product of the dream life and the net profit of our cells, something would be kept back, which we don't know how to give or give up. Money we forgot we buried. The squirrel hiding on the other side of the tree trunk.

If you could think of me as that part you cannot part with, no matter how hard you try, then the surface tension of the word, the skin of sound and form, would split like a beetle's wing casings and the secret take flight into the known.

We imagine perfection as an equal balance of trade, recycling, ZPG, a world at peace, coming together yet staying alone, *mens sana in corpore sano*, an ox allowed to graze as it treads the grain. But if God were to give you another of his unspeakable gifts, wouldn't you scream?

Take off the onion skin of everyday life. Remove the rind of the social being. Peel away the barbed leaves of language that protect the dumb heart. Chop through the woody shell and crack the nut of privacy. Hand it over, a pale green shoot like the germ of a garlic clove—yourself.

I will accept anything you offer with a nod and a smile. And as you offer a fingernail and say is this enough, as you offer a tooth and say is this enough, as you offer half your genetic material in the pith of an egg or the head of a spermatozoon and say is this enough, as you offer a lung, a kidney, bone marrow, blood, and say is this enough, I will smile and nod and say, "Do you think it's enough?"

We live in the hollow of an immense desire.

Life ends with a bonus, the means to our death. We are added to zero, then multiplied by it.

Weeping, wailing, gnashing of teeth, but it will be as if you left the world propped to take the sun against a stucco wall, between a patch of thistles and a heat pump, your last pint of fortified wine warming between your thighs. That is to say, for all its effect on you, the lamentation of survivors will be no more than a starling's

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monologue in the parking lot adjacent. The unendurable roar of storm on the sun's surface is no more audible. You will not even hear yourself. And yet your absence will leave a void like the extinction of the rose.

Now is the only acceptable time. But there is also later, in a moment or two, just a second, in a minute, tomorrow or the day after, any day, first thing in the morning, in the late afternoon, after dinner and before bed. If you can pray the way Scheherazade spun tales, you will pass hardly missing a beat.

You can't take it with you. Leave it with me.

Epistle II

History is not as porous to God as I thought and the gaps grow farther apart.

We can be like the child whose sister was raped and murdered who said at the funeral, "All the happy times I spent with you and will spend with you, I enjoyed and will enjoy." Or like the woman who has one memory of her mother who died when she was eight. She is shouting at her in front of a closet.

In the meantime, put in the eyes of wish fulfillment, put out the hand with its five hungers, put on the skin of fiction.

When, with the help of micromachines, I am able to alter my shape at will, indeed to give myself a lifeshape without a death instinct, when I have conquered death in this body or another substitute body, while retaining enough of my soul to enjoy it, will I be worrying you or myself about what God wishes for his children?

This, as they say, lies years in the future. And if we are made or remade from remnants, thawed and brought back, it is years in the future. Burn your body and you will be safe, probably. Or maybe not. We are grave robbers—the museums, the traveling exhibits.

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Eternal life may be coming back to this world perfected, without your permission.

The creation of diamonds. A blip. The crocheting of DNA. A blip. Cross-stitch of the bilateral face. A blip. Condensation of tears from Paleozoic seas. A blip. Endurance of the strange, the doubly strange, the triply strange particle. A blip.

The time it takes to bring you past the kiss, past the coupling, past the nearly dispassionate concentration, so that time can stop. Blip. Blip. Blip.

But the nine months, the terrible twos, the childhood, adolescence, adulthood, all the elongation of growing up and its estranging inwardness, the longed for reconciliation of parent and child before death, the wait for rebirth: these take forever.

What are you thinking now about eternal life? That it will be life eternally. And the bloody news at breakfast will continue. And the free-floating anxiety will continue. And the cosmic indifference will continue. But so will nakedness with my wife, black coffee in the morning, being read Dickens by my daughter before bedtime.

What are you thinking now about eternal life? That I will shed my guilt like sodden running clothes and hear the hymn of praise beginning in my throat as the multifoliate radiance anoints my face like a stiff hot shower and blurs every memory of earth.

What are you thinking now about eternal life? That I will wake up, stare at the twilit room, move over to mold my body to Amy's, my left hand on her right breast, and go back to sleep for half an hour.

When the preacher stood before the class that day in June, 1968, and said that history was a river that God entered at will, he wished to console us for the assassinations. To comfort those who mourned. But no one seemed to understand. Perhaps no one was mourning.

Perhaps he should have said that history was a freeway that God entered at will. Perhaps he should have said that history was a TV show that God interrupted at will. Perhaps he should have said that history was six periods of stone boredom five consecutive days a week and an afterschool job and a weekend of chores that God cancelled at will.

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He said history was a river. And the only river we knew was the Los Angeles, a concrete flood channel we had never seen in flood, running alongside the freeway like a giant gutter.

And the assassinations that spring had occurred on people's 16th birthdays.

Behind, beyond, before and after, existing now but separately, accessible in some special instances, like prayer, but present only as a listening, present only as a signal coming from a distance, present only as a silence.

We can live eternally like that. But for the time being, we will live as we are, for as long as we can.

These are the gifts of the Spirit. The belief that the body is enough. The belief that Love is a god. The belief that the next world is this world perfected.

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MAXINE KUMIN

Skinnydipping with William Wordsworth

I lie by the pond *in utter nakedness*
thinking of you, Will, your epiphanies
of woodcock, raven, rills and craggy steeps,
the solace that seductive nature bore,
and how in my late teens I came to you
with other Radcliffe *pagans suckled in*
a creed outworn, declaiming whole swatches
of "Intimations" to each other.

Moist-eyed with reverence, lying about
the common room, rising to recite
Great God! I'd rather be . . . How else
redeem the first flush of experience?
How else create it again and again? *Not in*
entire forgetfulness I raise up my boyfriend,
a Harvard man who could outquote me
in his Groton elocutionary style.

Groping to unhook my bra he swore
poetry could change the world for the better.
The War was on. Was I to let him die
unfulfilled? Soon afterward we parted.
Years later, he a decorated vet,
I a part-time professor, signed the same
guest book in the Lakes country. Stunned
by coincidence we gingerly shared a room.

Ah, Will, high summer now; how many more
of these? *Fair seed-time had my soul,*
you sang; what seed-times still to come?

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How I mistrust them, cheaters that will flame,
gutter and go out, like the scarlet tanager
who lights in the apple tree but will not stay.

Here at the pond, your *meadow, grove, and stream*
lodged in my head as tight as building blocks,
sun slants through translucent minnows, dragonflies
in paintbox colors couple in midair.
The fickle tanager flies over the tasseled field.
I lay your "Prelude" down under the willow.
My old gnarled body prepares to swim
to the other side.

Come with me, Will.
Let us cross over sleek as otters,
each of us bobbing in the old-fashioned breaststroke,
each of us centered in our belovèd Vales.

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After

Now morning comes. The air at last is warm,
And sleep is gone from your eyes. Turn out the light,
The one you read by, that stayed with you all night,
And step into the world. Silence your alarm.

Turn out the light and look out on the farm
Where wind stirs up the leaves and the trees repair.
"Come down to me in your cloud of raven hair,"
You hear yourself repeating like a charm,

But the one you're thinking of is in a dream.
Protect her there, and everywhere, you pray.
The one you love is elsewhere, so far away
Her absence shapes the night into a scream.

Yet morning comes, and though its hours endure
The calendar full of everything but her,
May they also ease your troubles, carry you far,
Safely, maybe even back to her.

There Is

In certain Oregon rivers the fish are dead;
Another beautiful stand of trees is cut.
But there is also the morning air,
The new-mown, harrowed field turning
Green, after early rain, in the late fall sun,
And horses nickering for alfalfa when

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You first appear at the barn door,
Singing for the lame mare.
There is the treehouse under construction,
The barn itself forever under repair.
There is still, for all its shadows,

The familiar light of home, its voices
Comforting from other rooms,
And the children on their way to school.
And there is always the calendar, not simply
Telling you another living day is through,
But igniting recollections of the days when you
Surprised yourself with competence, even grace.
There is blue ink on a cream-colored page,
A blue heron, imperious, commanding
The pond. And there is always you:
What you choose to believe and do.

The Moon Through the Trees

The eyes of animals shine in the grass,
Skunk silver, possum red. Far out,
From the northwest corner, your house

With its lighted windows looks
Like a ship at sea. You almost
Hear voices singing *Nearer My God to Thee*

When a green light appears, as dazzling as
The flash that blinds, then fills you
With sight, then goes with a head-on look.

It's the owl's eyes burning down from the barn's cupola,
It's the moon through the trees spreading itself
On the red fox emerging from midnight thickets.

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It's the sight of the dead, the mural
Of your past, the teasing glimpse
Of what comes when you are no one.

My Eastern Friend

When he was young he lived for drama.
He wished himself in a French movie,
Exchanging intellectual, sexist dialogue
With beautiful European women.
One by one, he took girls on long drives
Through the countryside in his two-seater.
Even under threatening skies he
Kept the top down. "For the romance,"
He said, "for the drama."

None complained. They drove
To get wet, to feel the wind stand
Their hair on end, to feel the elements
On their skin like hands all over them.
"Baby," they called each other, and "Toots."
They were doll faces, sweethearts.
Be it rain, be it sweat, it was wetness
They were after, long days and nights of it,
The romance of it.

*

At forty my friend gave up drink
And got heavy. "It's a shame
That drinking, and the loss
Of drinking, inhibit the drama," he said.
He slapped at his belly, insisting
That touching it was like setting one's hand
Unexpectedly in warm gum. To his credit,
He did this as if he were waving a flag.

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*

Driving home from an AA meeting,
My friend was in a talkative mood.

"I laid down with so many," he said,
"I grew weary (appreciative, but weary).
But lately I find I remember more clearly,
And worship more dearly, the flawed bodies,
The wrinkled, the whittled, the scarred
And varicose-veined, the overweight,
The thinned out, the lovers haunted
By everything but perfection.
These defined romance,
Having many miles of it on them."

*

My friend, approaching fifty, grows quiet,
Though a mutual acquaintance assures me
He is only turning up the volume elsewhere.
I hope so. I could not stand to think
Of his car up on blocks in some garage,
His fire put out by the torrent of so much drama,
That from now on I must miss him,
My cohort, my spy, my chronicler of romance.

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DAVID MASON

In Transit

The urge to settle never stays for long,
nor does desire to move like a windblown seed
when days have no more purpose than a song
at midnight, drifting from the olive trees,
or books you packed but will not try to read.
The passing stranger is well-known in Greece.

Once in Athens you rode the crowded bus,
watching the dull eyes of those who aimed for work
through traffic's overwhelming heave and fuss.
Elsewhere the perfect sculpture of the light
reminded you what leaves us in the dark.
No Baedeker explained your jaded sight.

Islands, more islands than you could name,
lay like lovers at morning: *Don't leave. Stay.*
But the only Eden that could ever claim
you wholly disappeared beneath the waves.
Revise, tomorrow, what you write today,
as tides reform in mouths of the sea caves.

A fisherman's fantasy, after all—
sun-dazed, wine-dazed—with a flick of her fins
dives out of sight, ignoring his fervent call
while his boat nods *yes* on the dancing sea.
Here all the turmoil of desire begins.
You are as happy as you'll ever be.

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Acrostic from Aegina

Anemones you brought back from the path
Nod in a glass beside our rumpled bed.
Now you are far away. In the aftermath
Even these flowers arouse my sleepy head.

Love, when I think of the ready look in your eyes,
Erotas that would make these stone walls blush
Nerves me to write away the morning's hush.
Nadir of longing, and the red anemones
Over the lucent rim—my poor designs,
X-rated praise I've hidden between these lines.

Untitled

Daughter, son, if your wobbly legs could stand
and step toward me, I would catch your fall
who never saw you, never held your hand.

I watch the night come on, but I don't call
you in for supper from your play with friends.
I cannot find you anywhere at all.

Nor will it help that thinking this way sends
me through my paces in the little room
my brain becomes, where thinking never ends.

You couldn't even choose to curse your home.
I would accept your hatred if it came,
but nothing does, or nothing with a name.

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LOUIS SIMPSON

Nero in Love

G. L. B. Wiehen,
W pronounced as V,
was a quiet, soft-spoken man.
He taught French and played the organ.

We were reading *Britannicus*
with Mister Wiehen, and came to the place
where Nero tells how he saw Junie.
He was filled with a "curious desire"
to see her when she was conveyed
in the night, secretly, to the palace . . .

"Sad, her eyes shining with tears, and bright
Even in the glare of arms and torchlight,
Just as she appeared when suddenly torn
From sleep, a beauty nothing could adorn . . .
What do you expect? Disheveled innocence,
The shadows, the flames, the cries, the silence . . . "

That night, waked by the moon,
I walked through a long corridor
to a great hall, and stood like Nero
behind a pillar and gazed at Junie.
I would have done anything for her.
I would have been one of the Caesars
people prayed to, or a great poet
like Racine.

But it was not to be.
Junie became a vestal virgin.
Enraged, I plunged headlong
into a life of crime.

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Two Ways

"Under which King, Besonian? Live, or die!"

Stopping at Horace's villa,
the clear running spring,

I cupped my hands and drank.
The Roman made things clear:

my life was in my hands,
and even the All-Father

could not take back a moment
when once it had been given.

And yet, there is Another.
When it storms and the sky opens,

in the flash of light he beckons
to lead me god knows where.

A Shearling Coat

Alexander Ortiz and Arlyne Gonzales
were walking home from a movie.

A car drew up, and two men
got out. One had a gun, the other

tugged at her shearling coat.
"Don't hurt her," Ortiz said, "she's pregnant."

The gunman shot him twice,
in the chest and throat.

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"What you do that for?" said the other.
"C'mon, c'mon, get the jacket,"

the gunman said, and they drove off
with a parting shot at Gonzales.

She had thrown herself down
on top of the dying man.

And I shall be wanting to be rid
of this thing to the end of my days.

Foursome

Adele said, "I know a game.
Each of us has to describe
his or her most embarrassing moment.
Then we'll all four take a vote,
and the winner will have a prize."

Joe told of going for a swim
and walking out of the showers
to find himself standing naked
at poolside, in plain view.
He had walked through the wrong door.

Maura's most embarrassing moment,
she said, was the evening
Joe's parents came to dinner.
She made a shrimp remoulade,
and ruined it entirely.

Adele's most embarrassing moment,
she said, was at Carnegie Hall,
in the *Divertimento for Strings.*
She played a wrong note,
a clinker. She could have died.

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Maura was staring at Adele.
Then she said it was late
and they had to be going.
Maura and Joe are no longer
a foursome with Frank and Adele.

The Night-Watchman's Daughter

When the minted gold in the vault smiles
like the night-watchman's daughter . . .

The night-watchman's daughter,
that is what Whitman calls her.
And she smiles. That is all he says.

I was walking on a path
that went down to the sea
when an old man stopped me.
Where did I think I was going?
The path was on private property.

I asked if he objected
to my using it. He did,
and I told him to drop dead.

This is where the night-watchman's daughter
comes in. I've thought about her.
She visits widows and orphans
and those who have no friends,
like the old man I told you about.

She looks in at night to see
how he's doing. Then they sit down
together and watch TV.

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State of the Art

As a dead cow swarms with flies
And maggots, poetry
Has an audience when it dies.
Timor mortis conturbat me.

Poetry-writing workshops thrive.
From sea to shining sea
They word-process and connive.
Timor mortis conturbat me.

Learn from the *New York Times*
What the state of the art will be:
Gangsta rap and cowboy rhymes.
Timor mortis conturbat me.

What *is* poetry? No one knows.
Meet me in a century,
And we'll talk. I'll be wearing a rose.
Timor mortis NON conturbat me.

A Walk with Bashō

Old boards by the sea
when the tide runs around them
still yearn to sail free.

The moon bright and round
troubles my heart. The old pond
frog-jumping-in sound.

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CHARLES TOMLINSON

The Vineyard above the Sea

This frontal hill falls sheer to water,
  Rugged forehead whose rhythmic folds
Are of stone, not flesh—walls
  That hold up the soil and the vines between,
Whose final fruit, essence and asperity,
  Is wine like daylight, tasting of the sea.
I lift a glass of it towards the sun
  Catching, within, the forms essentialised
Of these cliff-edge vine-rows—
  Cables hoisting a harvest to the summit—
And beyond the ripple of rock-shoulders
  Bearing the load of grapes and stone,
The town itself—almost a woman's name—
  Corniglia, as tight-gripped to its headland
As to their heights these walls, floating
  Along the contours like the recollection
Of a subsided ocean that has left behind
  The print of waves. Windows, doors
In the heaped facades cast a maternal glance
  Over a geology festooned, transformed,
Where through the centuries it hunched a way
  Towards these cube-crystals of the houses,
This saline precipice, this glass of light.

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Fonte Gaia

Children beg *monetine*
and fling them—*per la fortuna!*—
into the waters of the fountain.
A pigeon perched on her head,
Sapienza, not Fortuna
governs this flow,
graceful and severe.
Between what they wish for and what they will know
let no malignity interfere,
no waters tainted by coins and excrement
infect and blur the intent
innocence of their trust in luck.

July on the High Plain

Baled hay: the shaved land
  Where the cut crop grew and lay
Says that the multicoloured summer
  Is at an end. A pallid promontory
Extends between bare peaks,
  The roadside poplar rows
Crossing it at eccentric angles
  Beneath the bald crown of a mountain
Tonsured round by beeches. At noon
  Each tree sheds a shadow,
A perfect, separate circle on the ground,
  A dark disc one might well lift
And take away. But one must be swift
  Before the atmosphere consolidates as mist
And extinguishes all outline to become
  The black rainstains on every stone
In the evening storm, the downpour
  Babbling on the roof its liquid glossolalia,
As lightning explores the sleeping face of nature.

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RICHARD HORNBY

Crisis in the American Theatre

IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY, the American producer and director Augustin Daly took his New York theatre company to England a number of times, where they performed with great success. In 1888, his outstanding production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, with the American stars Ada Rehan and John Drew, was the first performance of that play given at Stratford. In the nineties, Daly actually opened a theatre of his own in London.

The idea of, say, the New York Shakespeare Festival touring England today, or having its own theatre in London, is a sad joke. English theatre companies, and individual English actors, come here on a regular basis, as they always have, but there is no longer any real reciprocation. American actors in England play American roles in American plays, but English actors in America play all kinds of roles in every kind of play, film, or television show. It is interesting to consider the number of British actors who have recently performed in the movies or TV, playing Americans, such as Ralph Fiennes, Anthony Hopkins, Bob Hoskins, Ben Kingsley, Gary Oldman, Paul Scofield, or Jane Seymour. There always used to be a "British colony" in Hollywood, but they were limited to playing crusty English butlers or romantic English heroes. Now they play everything, taking roles away from our own performers.

The American theatre began by imitating the English theatre; then, it became independent (like the country itself, only much later); then, for a while, it was actually superior to the English theatre. As recently as fifty years ago, in the postwar period, the American theatre was world class. The Actors Studio, before "The Method" hardened into ideology, gave our actors an honesty and rough energy that few British actors could match. There was also an older generation of American stage actors, like the Lunts, Katherine Cornell, or Eva LeGalienne, who could perform sophisticated roles with polish and panache. Broadway was still vital, producing Williams and Miller and the late plays of O'Neill at a time when the London stage was dominated by the ever-so-polite Christopher Fry and Terence Rattigan.

The revival of the British theatre, usually marked as beginning with the production of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1957, has coincided with a steady decline of American theatre. Broadway is now all but dead; there will always be a Broadway theatre, just as there will always be a New York subway system, but both have become erratic, expensive, and sluggish. There is some hope for the regional theatre movement,

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and nonprofit theatre generally, about which more presently, but the Broadway theatre has dwindled to a mere tourist attraction. The unmistakable sign of death is the fact that ordinary, middle-class, local people no longer go regularly to the theatre, as they did fifty years ago, and as they do in any city in the world where theatre is viable.

What is the reason for this horrid decline? How did a city with a great theatrical tradition, the theatrical center of America, within two generations dwindle from theatrical leader of the English-speaking world to a theatrical backwater? Many would blame the decline on competition from film and television, but in England, where the theatre flourishes, audiences not only can see plenty of film and television, they can see plenty of American film and television. In London, you can catch the "Oprah Winfrey Show" after dinner, just before you go off to the West End for the latest Stoppard play.

A second reason given for the end of the New York theatre is the lack of government subsidy, in contrast with European theatres, or even with many non-Western theatres. While I certainly agree that major government subsidy of theatre is long overdue in this country, that begs the question of why our commercial theatre has so drastically declined. When the Depression hit Broadway in the thirties, the number of productions fell from around 240 per year to around 150, a terrible decline, yet 150 is still about six times the number of Broadway productions per year in the roaring 1980s, or the squeaking 1990s. It has become common to compare the Reagan era with the 1920s, as another go-go decade for American business—except, apparently, show business. The twenties were the most prosperous era in history for our theatre, while the eighties and nineties have been the least. Supply-side economics, slashes in government spending, cutting welfare, cutting the capital gains tax, demolishing the NEA, were all devised to stimulate the economy, but not even the Republicans claim they will revive Broadway.

Again, looking at England puts our problems in perspective. It is true that the British subsidize theatre more than we do (though even there, they are cutting back), which helps their rep companies in particular, but the commercial West End theatres in London, the equivalent of our Broadway, do a brisk business without any subsidy. In America, the only people to make money out of theatre are the producers (sometimes), and the theatre owners (always). In England, however, it is still possible for actors, directors, stagehands, designers, and playwrights to make a comfortable living by working entirely for the stage, or nearly so. Two years ago, while lecturing at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, I was struck by the statistic that over 80% of their students are working professionally within two months of graduation, a percentage that American theatre students can only envy. It used to be possible for Americans also to make a living, and sometimes even wealth, from the stage. Writing or acting or directing or designing for the theatre were not seen as charity work, nor as mere steppingstones to Hollywood, but as lucrative careers in their own right.

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Another explanation for our theatrical decline pins the blame on greedy unions and theatre owners. There is a good deal of validity in this charge. Inflated salaries and featherbedding are the rule on Broadway, with the producers merely passing on the costs to the consumer, which is why ticket prices shoot up even in times of recession. As for the theatre owners, they exhibit all the traditional characteristics of an oligopoly. There are only three organizations that own Broadway theatres, and they are as bureaucratic, hidebound, and unimaginative as the "Big Three" American automobile manufacturers in the 1960s. Yet there is nothing new about New York theatre unions, which go back to the early twentieth century. Nor were earlier big theatre owners like the Theatrical Syndicate or the Shubert brothers particularly noted for their altruism or dedication to art. But over the decades, enlightened self-interest has given way to unenlightened self-destruction. The early unions were dedicated to achieving decent wages and working conditions; today's unions are interested only in regularly jacking up high weekly minimum wages, regardless of the long-range consequences in unemployed members, and in maintaining outdated, arcane regulations to force hirings of useless individuals. If the unions really had their members' long-range interests at heart, they would negotiate long-term contracts, whereby actors or technicians would take lower salaries in exchange for a guaranteed annual wage, and they would agree to reduce featherbedding in exchange for a specified increase in the number of productions per year, which the numerous empty theatres on Broadway could easily accommodate.

As for the theatre owners, if they were interested in making a profit rather than in making a killing (so that they often end up making neither), they would lease out those empty theatres to worthy theatre groups, rather than thinking only in terms of blockbusters. Just as the unions would rather have huge weekly salaries, but high unemployment, Broadway theatre owners prefer to seek only huge profits, at the expense of having theatres stand empty. But in the early 1920s, the Shubert brothers leased the Plymouth Theatre to Arthur Hopkins, a dedicated, enlightened director who used it for such productions as the John Barrymore *Hamlet*, or Anderson and Stallings' iconoclastic war play, *What Price Glory*, relatively modest shows that still managed to make a nice profit for everybody.

What I am arguing, then, is that there is not necessarily an antipathy between commerce and art. Of the three greatest periods in Western theatre history, the first, that of ancient Greece, was almost entirely subsidized; the second, the Elizabethan, was almost entirely commercial; and the third, the late-nineteenth-century European, was a mixture of both subsidized and commercial. It is thus impossible to generalize on the supposed benefits or detriments of government funded theatre, or of government funded art. Karen Finley, the chocolate-coated avant-garde performer whose subsidy roused the ire of Jesse Helms, may or not be a great artist, but there can be no doubt, for example, that

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Henrik Ibsen, also a recipient of government largess, was a great playwright.

The argument in favor of funding art through the marketplace is that it allows the boldest and freest form of expression. Anyone with a few thousand dollars can put on a play, without worrying about placating boards of governors, toadying to corporate, foundation, and municipal sponsors, or incurring the wrath of moralistic legislators like Senator Helms.

The free enterprise approach to the arts seems to work well these days in America with commercial publishing, and with commercial movie production. We recognize that, while New York publishing houses and Hollywood studios produce mostly junk, from time to time they do turn out works of genuine artistic merit. Commercial theatrical production in New York used to operate in the same manner, and still does in England. Intellectuals always used to sneer at Broadway, in the same breath as they sneered at Hollywood, but with the long view of history we now see that just as the Hollywood studio system produced much that was fine, Broadway in the first half of the twentieth century produced O'Neill, Odets, Miller, and Williams, plus Berlin, Porter, the Gershwins, Rodgers and Hart, and Rodgers and Hammerstein, while involving producing organizations like the Provincetown Players, the Theatre Guild, and the Playwrights' Company. Even the Group Theatre, although they saw themselves as wild-eyed radicals, used Broadway theatres and Broadway production methods. Today, however, Broadway production has not only dwindled in size, it has become like commercial American television—timid, formulaic, and passionless. No Jesse Helms demanded that *The Phantom of the Opera* be given a long run, or that *The Kentucky Cycle* or *Angels in America* be withdrawn; these odious results were accomplished by the invisible hand of the marketplace.

We thus seem now in a phase in which some form of subsidy is essential if this great art form, the theatre, is to survive in America. (The source need not be government alone—surely among all those millionaires and billionaires the Republican tax cuts have benefited there are a few individuals willing to contribute to the culture of the nation.) A mixture of commercial and subsidized theatre has worked spectacularly well in England. Nevertheless, the woes of our theatre cannot be blamed entirely on impersonal market forces. In the unlikely event that Congress suddenly started funding the NEA at a European or even Canadian level (the Canadian government spends ten times more per capita on the arts than the U.S. government), I doubt if we would find a Comédie Française or Royal Shakespeare Company suddenly springing up. The collapse of the American theatre is not just the result of shifting finances, but reflects a perilous loss of will and imagination. If we look at the nonprofit theatres in this country, we note that even those that are prospering look paltry by European standards. Few can pay their actors a living wage. Except for some summer theatres, few run true, revolving repertory. Offerings are scanty by any measure; the leading theatre in

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Los Angeles, for example, the Mark Taper Forum, presents only about half a dozen plays a year, a fraction of what you can see at the National Theatre or the Royal Shakespeare Company in London. But worst of all, few make any serious effort to produce new plays, which is essential for a viable theatre. The Broadway theatre, even at its mostly crassly commercial, was centered on playwrights; our nonprofit theatres are centered on directors. Some of these are talented and dedicated individuals, but far too many are interested only in calling attention to themselves with flashy, glib productions that show a contempt for the texture and detail of the playscript. A careful, thoughtful, vigorously acted production of *The Merchant of Venice* will impress audiences with Shakespeare's genius, but changing it to *The Merchant of Venice Beach* will impress them, and the critics, with your own genius, which is far more important.

Nevertheless, not all the creative energy is being expressed in the wrong way in the American theatre. The productions of Robert Shenkkan's *The Kentucky Cycle* or Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, large-scale, major works that both began in regional theatres, were encouraging signs in the early 1990s that our nonprofit theatres might at last be coming of age, though as the decade progressed they were not followed up by comparable new plays, by Shenkkan, Kushner, or anybody else. A moment of exuberance was followed by yet another retrenchment.

The founding of regional theatres in the 1950s and 1960s was supposed to be the start of a decentralization of the American theatre, but most have remained New-York-centered despite the continuing decline of theatre in New York, hiring their actors and directors, and choosing their plays, from Broadway or off-Broadway. The Pulitzer-Prize-winning plays of Shenkkan and Kushner, the first and second to win the prize without a New York production, eventually made it to Broadway, but they were conceived, shaped, and performed in regional theatres, using regional actors and directors. If such theatres can restart this trend, there is hope for a revival of the American theatre.

Some of the best theatre in America is performed by minority groups. Our blacks, Puerto Ricans, Jews, French, Italians, Irish, homosexuals, or Asians, find theatre the best medium for exploring their problems because it is the most efficient way such groups have of communicating among themselves. Film and television are potentially much cheaper per audience member, but only when audiences are very large, because of the enormous capital investment required. Using their own actors, directors, and playwrights gives these groups a vitality that is now almost unique in America. The problem is that such theatre companies tend to remain small and inward-looking by their very nature; their work is amateur in the best sense—from the love of it—but also in the financial sense, since few can make a living from it. The one example I can think of where a minority theatre artist has moved into the majority, while remaining true to his origins, and staying in the theatre rather than moving on to film, is the playwright August Wilson. Wilson writes about

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his own people, black Americans, just as O'Neill wrote about Irish Americans, Odets about Jewish Americans, or Williams about Southern white Americans, but like his predecessors, Wilson creates characters of such vividness, with moral dilemmas of such intensity, that his plays are accessible to all Americans, and indeed, all the world. If other minority theatre artists can follow Wilson's example, there is also hope for a revival of our theatre.

Nevertheless, theatre requires an audience. Without an audience that is passionately devoted to theatre, speculation about playwriting, theatre companies, or subsidies is sterile. If we look at the American theatre audience over the past fifty years, we get a better perspective about what has been going on than by analyzing theatrical production in isolation. Michael Lind, in his recent book, *Up from Conservatism*, defines four major factions in twentieth-century American politics: left liberalism, center left, moderate conservatism, and radical conservatism.[1] He notes that in the thirties and forties, the center left was predominant, as epitomized by the New Deal and the Fair Deal of Roosevelt and Truman. Today, the center left is a gaping hole. It is not that there are no longer any individuals of that persuasion, but the group has few significant national leaders, little impact on the media, and no presidential candidates. (There has not been a center-left president since Lyndon Johnson.)

It is no coincidence that the decline of the center left corresponds with the decline of the American theatre. The center left, perhaps never a majority in America, but still a large minority, has become a silent minority. Center-left publications like *The Reporter*, *The Saturday Review*, *Commentary*, or *The New Republic* have ceased publishing, or shifted politically to the right. Center-left political writers like Walter Lippmann, Richard Strout, or I. F. Stone have departed the scene. But equally important, the American theatre, which from the twenties until well into the fifties was a channel of communication of the center left, now exhibits the same gap as does American politics. Broadway used to be center left to the core; there was even a Broadway playwright, Robert Sherwood, in the FDR New Deal administration. The pleas for racial tolerance and social justice, the attacks on big business and laissez-faire capitalism, were common not only in the plays of major writers like O'Neill, Miller, and Williams, but in those of lesser playwrights like Lillian Hellman or Maxwell Anderson. The musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein were heavily, perhaps mawkishly, left center. Even Clifford Odets, who as a onetime member of the Communist party qualifies as far left, nonetheless expressed a humane left centrism in his plays rather than Communist agitprop. But most important, the New York audience of the time, dominated by Jews but by no means limited to that group, held the same tolerant, socially progressive, nonideological viewpoint as

[1] Michael Lind, *Up from Conservatism: Why the Right is Wrong for America* (New York, 1996), p. 10.

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did the playwrights, actors, and directors. The theatre spoke to a specific audience, but also for them. When that viewpoint became suspect, not only to enemies on the right and left, but within liberalism itself, the theatre that epitomized it was doomed. The financial problems, the hidebound unions, the narrow-minded producers and theatre owners, the competition from other media, could all have been overcome if the audience demanded it, but the will was no longer there.

What, then, remains of theatre in America? The avant-garde can be seen as representing Lind's left liberalism, which continues traditions of the American Communist party in the thirties, the Progressive Party of Henry Wallace in the forties, the New Left of the sixties, and the McGovern Democrats of 1972. In purely political terms, the avant-garde at times takes the same kind of strident anti-American stance as these political groups; for example, the recent Peter Sellars production of *The Persians* depicted the Gulf War as gallant little Iraq getting unjustly clobbered by a depraved superpower, never once mentioning Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. But equally important, the avant-garde also trashes theatrical traditions, expressing contempt for playscripts, for craft, for the richness and complexity of great dramatic art.

The political far right is represented in our theatre only negatively, in its calls for censorship, and cuts in government subsidy, but with these it demonstrates an odd similarity to the left-liberal approach to theatre; it is mindlessly pro-American, just as the latter is mindlessly anti-American, but both display a contempt for theatre and its traditions. The avant-garde theatre and its cheering section, the professors of "Performance Studies," try to accomplish with both theory and practice what Jesse Helms would do by censorship. The targets are somewhat different, but the intolerance is the same. The agendas are somewhat different, but both have little use for art, seeing theatre only in raw political terms. Finley is an uppity white American female—out with her! Shakespeare is a dead white European male—out with him!

Moderate conservatism, the viewpoint of political figures of the past like Thomas Dewey or Dwight Eisenhower, or today by Jimmy Carter or Bill Clinton, is represented in our theatre by the major nonprofit theatre companies, and by much of what remains of Broadway. Left centrism called for strong government action to combat injustice, a viewpoint expressed, as I have noted, by most American playwrights of the first half of the twentieth century. Radical conservatism calls for strong government to combat the menace of Communism, liberalism, feminism, homosexuals, immigrants, and the rest of an ever-growing despised list, which has come to include artists. Moderate conservatism, on the other hand, calls for reducing government as much as possible, in the arts, in education, and in programs to help the poor. It is reflected in the theatre by an apolitical regional theatre that merely repeats standard works of the past, and by an equally apolitical Broadway, where spectacle has taken the place of ideas, not to mention character and plot as well. Bill Clinton's philosophy that the government can no longer be called

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upon to solve social problems is reflected on such stages by a philosophy that social problems do not matter, do not even exist. The middlebrow pretensions of traditional Broadway, the squishy Oscar Hammerstein beliefs that love can end racism or that fascism can be fought by calmly walking away from it, may have been simplistic, but at least Broadway's heart was in the right place. Today, the moderate conservative theatre has no heart, nor much of a head either.

Lind's book predicts a possible revival of the center left. I am less enamored of the center left than he is; he fails to see that our involvement in the Vietnam War was a center-left fiasco. Nevertheless, I too deplore the extreme polarization that has developed in American politics, which is reflected in our theatre. There is plenty of theatre in America today, but there is no longer any mainstream theatre. In order for our theatre to be viable, we need such a theatre; alternative theatres, whether avant-garde, regional, or ethnic, require a mainstream theatre as a standard, as a challenge, as something to fight against as well as to imitate. Like any art form, theatre is a system, in which all parts interrelate, whether in conjunction or in opposition. No art form can exist without a mainstream, if only so that serious artists can challenge it.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, drama in both Europe and America has been an outlet for humane, non-ideological, progressive opinions. Ibsen, Chekhov, Shaw, O'Neill were center-left in the best sense, arguing for tolerance and decency, while exposing the contradictions and excesses that characterize a modern capitalist, individualist society. Even a radical playwright like Brecht, or an apolitical one like Beckett, share much the same view if you look beneath the surface. Today, however, public discourse seems dominated by ideologues of both right and left, which leaves little room for theatre, at least theatre as art. The right would like to starve serious theatre of funding; the left would like to politicize it, replacing traditional dead white European male playwrights with politically correct no-talents who promote a left-wing agenda. Theatre as art, however, is always antithetical to any narrow political conviction. Unpredictable, sometimes even subversive, hard to interpret, and above all humbling, such theatre is a rebuke to all ideologies.

Patrick Stewart is yet another example of a British actor coming to America, to succeed by outclassing the local competition. Though well-trained and talented, he had not been a particularly big star in his native country when he came here in the 1980s with a group of Royal Shakespeare Company actors, to perform and teach at the University of California, Santa Barbara. But then, green card in hand, he headed for Hollywood, where he found fame and fortune starring in "Star Trek: The Next Generation." He has also had a few good film roles—he stole the movie *Jeffrey* in a supporting part as a gay American, even though in real life he is a straight Englishman—but he has not forgotten his

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theatrical roots. His Prospero in *The Tempest* at the New York Shakespeare Festival two years ago, and his Othello last fall at The Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C., were luminous performances.

Because it is no longer politically correct for white actors to play Othello, Stewart and his director, Jude Kelly (yet another transplanted Brit, as was set and costume designer Robert Innes Hopkins) hit upon the idea of doing the play as a "photo negative," with a white Othello supported by a mostly African-American cast. (The Venetians were all black except for a few white servants, while most of the Cypriots were white.) The idea was to stress Othello's otherness, his outsider role in a Venice that needs him but cannot accept him. The concept held some promise. Europeans in the early sixteenth century were certainly racist, but their bigotry was more complex than ours, since they did not divide humans up into discrete races based on skin color. Shakespeare makes no bones about Othello's color—he is called "black," "an old black ram," etc., and is described as thick-lipped and sooty-bosomed. Nevertheless, there is no mention of his belonging to any inferior race; he is an exotic other, like a man from Mars, both a fascination (those stories he told Desdemona) and a threat.

Kelly's version of the text kept all the color words unchanged, which bothered me—if "black" in Shakespeare's text is to symbolize mere otherness, why cannot "white" do the same? (Besides, she did change words to fit Hopkins' modern military costuming, so that, because of the soldiers' guns, "put up your bright swords" became "put up your bright arms.") In the end, however, conception was less important than execution. Stewart was a great Othello, beautifully spoken, intense, and above all, commanding. He is neither tall nor overly muscular, and his head seems too big for his body. (Perhaps because of his head being shaved? He also added a large, jagged black scar on the back.) But with his piercing eyes and well-modulated voice, he expressed a wide range of thought and feeling in Shakespeare's lines, playing humor and tenderness in addition to pain and rage. Perhaps because of the directorial concept, he did not do so well with the wilder side of Othello, so that the epilepsy seemed to be petit mal, and you had to take Iago's description of Othello's rolling eyes on faith. Stewart was like the eighteenth-century tragedian John Philip Kemble, whose lofty passion always had dignity and restraint.

The supporting cast, however, were mostly like twentieth-century American undergraduates. The exceptions were the two leading women: The lovely Patrice Johnson was an effective Desdemona, slender, very dark, and beautifully costumed; her voice thinned out in emotional scenes, but otherwise she spoke and sang adequately. Franchelle Stewart Dorn, a respected Washington regular, provided an interesting take on Emilia as an abused spouse, her face and body expressing long-suffering exhaustion. This did not do much for the earthiness in her final scene with Desdemona, but it was an intriguing contemporary touch nonetheless.

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The males in the cast, however, were hopeless. Some of the finest Shakespearean actors in America are black, but none was to be found here, where mispronunciation, misunderstanding, and monotony were the rule. Ron Canada as Iago was stocky, elderly, and bespectacled—thus obliterating expression in his eyes, if he had any. His speech was as stiff as his body, and he often overenunciated, or hit the wrong accents. An *Othello* without a capable Iago is like an engine running with a broken piston; as in the New York *Tempest*, this was a star vehicle with a terrific star but a stalled vehicle. In America, to see Patrick Stewart onstage with adequate support, you need to see him in a one-person show, like his perennial *A Christmas Carol*, where he plays all the roles.

Inadequate support doomed another classical production last fall, *Cyrano de Bergerac* at the Roundabout in New York, starring Frank Langella. This elegant actor is one of America's few genuine theatre stars today, a worthy successor to John Drew, John Barrymore, or Alfred Lunt, and powerful competition to British interlopers like Patrick Stewart. Langella is not athletic enough to be a perfect Cyrano, but he moves well, and fenced adequately. Vocally, however, he was perfection, speaking the great *tirades* trippingly on the tongue, with energy, variety, and humor. *Cyrano*, for all its hokey echoes of *Le Cid*, is ultimately a comedy of manners, a form at which Langella is a master. His ease on stage, which he dominates by his mere presence, and the twinkle in his eyes, made him a delight. Langella can make eloquence seem so easy as to be inevitable.

The rest of the production was so bad, however, that we would have been better served if he had simply given a recitation. Low budget, low imagination, and low talent were the order of the day. James Noone's unit setting, with neoclassical arches in cool green imitation marble, looked all right except when there were actors on it, when its awkward angles and lack of depth inhibited movement. Even worse, the opening scene in the Hôtel de Bourgogne was staged in front of the curtain! This was a compromise one expects to find in a high school production, not in a supposedly major professional one.

Carrie Robbins' costumes included drab leather (vinyl?) jerkins on the men, who for some reason all had crew-cut hair. The program notes insisted that "*Cyrano de Bergerac* is a story about panache," but there was nary a plume in sight, neither literally nor figuratively; all was so drab and monotone that, aside from Langella, it was hard to tell one character from the next, especially since the acting was so uniformly wooden. For example, in Cyrano's first big speech, where he suggests a wondrous range of descriptions for his nose, Langella was amazingly varied, but Armand Schultz, playing Cyrano's opponent Valvert, rattled off insults as if he were getting paid by the word.

Langella directed this wretched production himself (another way of saving money?), which is rarely a wise idea. He also adapted the text, cutting out many of the supporting cast, while using a pedestrian

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translation by Brian Hooker, which even rendered Cyrano's famous "mon panache" as "my soul," a limp abstraction.

The classics are rightly seen as the touchstone of theatrical production, the measure by which actors, directors, and designers are judged. The productions of *Othello* and *Cyrano* typify much that is wrong with the American theatre today: inadequate funding, weak supporting casts, lack of imagination. Nevertheless, I do not wish to sound too gloomy. There is still a great reservoir of theatrical talent, if we can figure out how to tap it. As I go around the country seeing theatre, I am impressed by how much good work is actually being done. (Indeed, the problem at The Shakespeare Theatre in Washington is that most of the cast were not their regulars.) With clarity of vision and renewal of will, we can have the theatre that our country needs.

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JOHN LOUGHERY

American Art: The Center and the Edge

AT THE LAST TURN OF THE CENTURY IN AMERICA, mastery of certain graphic and painterly skills and a place in a tradition that ran from Sargent and Chase to Homer and Hassam were what mattered in attracting patrons and establishing a career. The process was suffocatingly narrow to a younger generation who acquired their notions of art from visits to Alfred Stieglitz's gallery, glimpses of Cézanne and Matisse in Europe, or contact with *provocateurs* like Marcel Duchamp. At our own turn of the century, a variation of the same enterprise has been played out to the *n*th degree: significant artists must take their place in an identifiable tradition, but in this case, as shadowboxers in a game that insists they act as rebels against an entrenched, conservative authority. So there was nothing unusual about an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in the winter of 1997 entitled "On the Edge" that was based on the premise (to quote a wall plaque at the show) that the works of art collected by Werner and Elaine Dannheisser matter in large part because they "press against the formal and thematic constraints of mainstream art." What these constraints might be in the free-for-all atmosphere of the moment is anybody's guess.

The first and most striking impression evoked by a visit to "On the Edge" had to do with how predictable the Dannheissers' collection is. Sigmar Polke, Bruce Nauman, Brice Marden, Cindy Sherman, Anselm Kiefer, Gilbert and George, Joseph Beuys, Robert Ryman—the names are numbingly familiar to anyone who spends even a little time in contemporary museums or art galleries. Now, I am all in favor of celebrating private patronage in museum settings, but is it possible that we are never to see an installation of a modern collection that offers some surprises, some artists who have not appeared on the covers of all the art magazines and in the usual biennials, who have been scouted out by the collectors themselves in advance of the curators and the critics? An exhibition that took some authentic risks and merited the title "On the Edge"? Perhaps, in the end, there is too much money involved. As Virgil Thomson once remarked to me in the course of an ill-fated interview (no crankier man ever drew breath), "Look over the list of the founders of the Modern on the wall of the museum. Smart investment protectors, every one of them!" Dotage loomed, but Thomson was on the mark there. And there are no investments to protect without

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mainstream approval and support. Most of the artists in "On the Edge" are "fringe" or "avant-garde" figures in the 1990s only if the terms are drained of any meaning. Some of these artists have been the leaders and teachers of an entire generation of artists and art students.

The second impression this large, well-arranged show left me with is how little consistency there is to the aesthetic judgments made by the tastemakers of the day. A unified sensibility, or basis for personal judgment, would seem to be irrelevant or offensive. But how is it possible that a curator or collector would want to spend money on both Richard Serra *and* Jeff Koons, on Anselm Kiefer *and* Robert Ryman? An appreciation of Kiefer's energy and grim sensuality or a love of the severe, weighty, rust-stained sculptural forms Serra makes should, I would think, render Koons's ceramic *Pink Panther* glib and annoying. They don't originate in different worlds. They originate in opposing worlds. Conversely, if one wanted to verify Mr. Koons's quasi-postmodernist approach to art, all tacky allusion and self-consciously simulated creativity, well and good; but doesn't it follow that you would judge Kiefer and Serra to be ponderous and self-important, indifferent to irony and obsessed in an old-fashioned way with object-making? Yet at MoMA we were not asked to take the Dannheisser collection as a sociological curiosity, a broad survey of our time, but as an artistic experience of a rigorous nature. That kind of chic pluralism, however, suggests that nothing is to be taken as more significant than anything else—no matter that the whimsy of Tony Cragg's sculptures made of bottles and assorted detritus, the political drama of Sue Coe, or the meditative photographs of Thomas Struth don't belong to the same aesthetic universe as Katharina Fritsch's dour black-and-white tableware or Jeff Koons's sophomoric vacuum cleaners under glass. Yet can "equal" ever be taken seriously? (A recent hilarious *Architectural Digest* photo spread on the Sylvester Stallone estate in Miami comes to mind: Italian Rococo cheek-by-jowl with Andy Warhol, Francis Bacon, and Leroy Nieman.) Certain tastes—or, more accurately, beliefs—preclude others, if the original tastes and beliefs are more than passing fancies.

Finally, "On the Edge" underscored a point that is hardly new, but perhaps has never been made as succinctly: the need for an artist or collector to assume a bold adversarial stance is simply a given in the current climate. My problem with that approach is not political or aesthetic. New styles, new materials, critical theory, opposition to the powers-that-be: all of those elements have a robust place in art. To go back to the days of genre painting and representational sculpture is unthinkable, absurd. But it is not adversarial to make a living reiterating ideas that everyone who matters in the acquisitions game approves of, that rich museum boards can happily live with, that smart undergraduates take for granted. Sleek minimalism and aggressive video art, anti-narratives and critiques of capitalist mechanization, weren't revolutionary even twenty years ago.

Dead ends get reached pretty quickly when artists are driven by the

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pressure to act as outsiders and social critics, especially when they don't have much to say. Another recent example would be Barbara Kruger, maker of a fair number of nice dust-jacket images and billboard posters. In her autumn show at the Mary Boone Gallery (located in the heart of "outsider" territory, Fifth Avenue and 57th Street), she took the Kennedy brothers' egregious exploitation of Marilyn Monroe as the subject of one of her more flamboyant new sculptures. A perfectly good theme, in my book, though one that is apt to lend itself more readily to a narrative or cinematic treatment. Kruger's contribution, JFK and Bobby from the waist up holding the star aloft, her skirt uplifted to afford a peek at her vagina, adds to the kitsch of that moral tragedy rather than commenting on it. Earnestness alone doesn't make it; feminist bile is scarcely an improvement over patriarchal domination. In a similar vein, Robert Longo's winter show at Metro Pictures, one of the many SoHo galleries that have relocated to Chelsea, dealt with the visual bombardment that characterizes life in postwar America and the subliminal power of certain overused images to define a generation. In identical black frames, 366 black-and-white drawings packed the two rooms of the gallery salon-style, floor to ceiling. JFK in the Oval Office, Marlon Brando's Godfather, Castro, Flipper, Newt, Malcolm X, Nike and Coca-Cola logos, urban violence, modern art, famous film scenes: this was a baby boomer's pageant. Alluding perhaps to the impact of overexposure to the same icons and once-spontaneous moments, many of the pictures are slightly blurred. Longo's intentions and his environmental creation weren't completely banal or purposeless: after enough time in the two huge rooms, made claustrophobic by so many recognizable images, you began to feel the breath sucked out of your body, an oppressiveness afflicting both head and spirit—not unlike the sensation that accompanies hours of channel-surfing and magazine-skimming. Still and all, we aren't talking about a fresh insight, and the ennui of the "cutting edge" label was quick to descend. Possessed of a healthy ego, Longo has entitled his project the "Magellan series."

For an examination of the roots and the development of this pattern in twentieth-century American art—the artist as vehement antitraditionalist, as restless experimenter, and finally as rote manufacturer of a marketable product—the Robert Rauschenberg exhibition sponsored by the Guggenheim Museum was useful, if not especially exciting. The museum cannot be faulted for lack of a thorough effort: the entire 88th Street building was given over to a full-career retrospective, as was the ample space of the Guggenheim SoHo, with a gallery on Hudson Street presenting a special installation earlier in the fall of *The 1/4 Mile or 2 Furlong Piece.*

For many, Rauschenberg is the quintessential postmodern figure—scavenger, collaborator, improvisationalist, and irreverent mixer of media. A graduate of Black Mountain College in the 1940s, where he studied with Josef Albers and met John Cage and Merce Cunningham,

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he was one of the most dynamic and successful members of the generation (which included Cy Twombly and Rauschenberg's onetime lover, Jasper Johns) that took what it needed from the reigning Abstract Expressionist masters, but eventually turned its back on the aspirations, confident gestural style, and even the strict paint-on-canvas format of Pollock, et al. Yet this was a group that never fully embraced the cheekiness or "cool" of the later, campier Pop Artists (which, to my mind, is attempting to have it both ways). Rauschenberg's credo that "art relates to both art and life," extolled in the show's catalogue, was an inspiration for the work that made him a name to be reckoned with—though it's hard to believe that classic Modernism was as fettered and aloof as this statement seems to imply. But that perspective is, in the new mythology, the crux of "cutting edge." Whatever came immediately before has to be seen as limited, tradition-bound, quickly dismissible by younger, fresher minds.

Decades after the fact, some of this "mixing" of art and life has a vivid historical interest, specifically in the "combines" of the 1950s which bring myriad non-art objects into relation with paper and canvas. A painter who wanted both to honor and remove from their pedestals the titans of the day was in an intriguing bind. *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) was the clearest expression of the dilemma, though the use of newspaper collage as a ground for the black paintings (1951–1953) and the inclusion of pebbles and dirt into other canvases was part of the same exploration. Even the previous movements in that direction by the Dadaists and Surrealists could seem too arty, too tentative, for men who came of age during World War II and shunned gentility. But—and here is the rub—a vast amount of what was on view at the Guggenheim spoke of reaction and restlessness unending, of a body of work that sees *everything* as a constraint to be resisted. Worse still, many of the oil-and-silkscreened-ink collages of the Kennedy years (all those astronauts and mushroom clouds), the Angora goats and rubber tires, and the water-filled bathtubs with floating jugs look forced and vaguely corny now that the battle against rarefied aestheticism and art-school instruction has been won. They look scattershot, and less meaningful than similar but more thematically consistent work by someone like Joseph Beuys. Rauschenberg as a set designer for modern choreographers like Merce Cunningham and Trisha Brown makes sense, especially given his fascination with technology. Rauschenberg on the page can be interesting; a good color reproduction with a plausible exegesis has a weird appeal for me. Yet it is precisely in a museum context, as objects to be looked at and pondered, that the nature of the art Robert Rauschenberg makes is least open to authentic or lasting connections, and that, in the long run, is a ludicrous situation.

The three-part Guggenheim show was meant to be daunting. Several hundred collages, combines, silkscreens, readymades, metallic paintings, and scrapmetal sculptures—clever, inert, or just boring as sin—can have a steamroller effect. A less devious approach to an artist's

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canon was on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, where the one-floor Richard Diebenkorn retrospective was the main show of the fall. That exhibition also posited a different outlook on the idea of novelty and tradition, of an artist's relation to both past and present. For it is hard to see Diebenkorn (1922–1993) as significantly less demanding—or even, in certain lights, less radical—than Rauschenberg, yet he doesn't evince the same need to jettison all his predecessors or adopt a mercilessly combative stance.

As the Whitney retrospective made clear, Diebenkorn was able to handle the position a talented man might take in a certain historical line—and, in his case, the inspirations were formidable and diverse (e.g., Cézanne, Matisse, Mondrian, Arshile Gorky, Edward Hopper, and David Park)—while still seeking out ways to press against many boundaries that had already been set. He avoided the well-worn routes in several ways: he did not relocate to New York and distance himself from the light and water of the Bay Area that meant so much to him; he did not accept his lifelong residence in California as having anything to do with regionalism or any other quaint, limiting self-identifications; he did not proceed on a straight path from early representational work to undiluted abstraction; and he was not inclined to adhere in a lockstep manner to the critical dicta that informed so much of the discourse of the 1950s and 1960s. The latter point refers to both Clement Greenburg's influential writings on the necessity of emphasizing the flatness of the picture plane and Harold Rosenberg's celebration of Action Painting, of the canvas as a psychodramatic and aesthetic arena. The career charted by the Whitney's survey was more individual, eclectic, ostensibly modest, and indifferent to schools and fashions.

Diebenkorn's earliest extant paintings in any significant number are the abstractions he completed in the late 1940s and 1950s while living in Sausalito, Albuquerque, Urbana (when he was teaching at the University of Illinois), and Berkeley, and they tend to be titled simply by location and number. His turning to expressionist landscapes and still lifes in the late 1950s was judged hopelessly backward at the time, yet if anything, they now seem the logical outcome of the earlier nonrepresentational images: these paintings have the same concern with segmented parts, horizontal structures, and bright, thick strokes of oil. They also made for some choice moments at the Whitney, examples of the richest color and most fluid brushwork of their time. *Chabot Valley* (1955), *Scissors and Lemon* (1959), *Bottles* (1960), *Knife in a Glass* (1963), and *Poppies* (1963) are not likely to have been the products of an artist who never ventured beyond the lessons of realism. The three tiny paintings of knives carving into tomatoes on a table counter, all from 1962 and 1963, are as sensuous as anything David Park or Elmer Bischoff achieved on a larger, more brashly representational scale. Of course, well-made as some of the still lifes, ocean views, and isolated seated figures from this period are, it would be an odd, truncated story had Diebenkorn continued in this spirit indefinitely or not lived another three decades. Appropriately, the

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exhibition led us—by way of some explicit *hommages* to Matisse (e.g., the 1965 *Recollections of a Visit to Leningrad* or the *Large Still Life* of 1966)—along the path back to abstraction and Diebenkorn's great claim on our attention today. It is precisely because this breakthrough didn't come easily (the fits-and-starts were evident in several paintings at the Whitney), that the final resolution of the Ocean Park series seems so triumphant.

What Diebenkorn gave us in the Ocean Park paintings of the late 1960s through the 1980s was the equivalent of a new voice in poetry—informed by the art of others, not unconnected to more loudly advertised currents of the day, but un-derivative and inimitable. Spare rather than reductive like Sol Lewitt or Robert Ryman, the paintings' blocks, patches, and diagonals of color evoke architecture and landscape simultaneously. They are plaintively depopulated of figures or outward manifestations of nature, rather than unmindful of their existence or antipathetic to them. The reworked and overpainted areas denote struggle and determination, a pleasing mixture of forethought and trial-and-error. These paintings forsake bloodless perfection and celebrate tone, mood, and singular ambition. The sampling brought together by curator Jane Livingston, including the Philadelphia Museum's *Ocean Park No. 79* (1975) and the Oakland Museum's *Ocean Park No. 107* (1978), was close to perfect.

To end in a different key entirely: a round of applause for the International Center of Photography for its 1997 show in midtown with the O. Henry-esque title, "Weegee's World: Life, Death, and the Human Drama." In Arthur Fellig (1899–1968), otherwise known as the incomparable night-owl photographer "Weegee," the center and the edge of American art meet quite nicely. Here was an immigrant child, a man who was a freelance photographer for New York City's newspapers (as plebeian a line of work in the 1930s and 1940s as you could name) who never aspired to small-circle avant-garde status—yet whose prolific output as a journalist-chronicler did not prevent his ultimate recognition as an artist, which he always knew he was, of a decidedly unusual temperament. Weegee looked for the edge in the center (or the center in the edge), so to speak. His talent arose out of his morbid curiosity, openness to offbeat experience, and personal eccentricity as much as it did from his technical skill, though there was plenty of the latter quality to be seen in the ICP show.

The show was divided into the expected categories: the Circus, the Opera, Harlem, the Village, Times Square, Fire, Portraits, and so on. But the divisions blend after a while into an amorphous whole—the odd, sometimes belligerent camera angles, the stark contrasts, the lacerating chiaroscuro, the undercurrents of tension and desire, the untidy inclusiveness of it all, the elegant mists; they find a place in one genre as well as another. Having more in common with a *noir* writer like Nathanael West than with any other photographers who come to mind,

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Weegee alone located the defiant exuberance of a young drag queen emerging from the back of a paddy wagon, the grim energy of the Bowery taverns, the horrifying grandeur of a tenement fire, the rage in the eyes of newly arrested hoodlums, and the theatrical, indelicate power of gun-blasted bodies on a pavement surrounded by gaping spectators. His overdressed matrons at the opera have a hypnotic seediness not so different from his streetwalkers and barflies.

"You can't be a nice nelly and do photography," Weegee once commented about his practice of sticking his camera in the faces of unwilling subjects and appearing on the scene of private tragedies and intimacies. But he knew, as we do, that these faces and events expressed something beyond themselves that was worth recording or interpreting. His photographs also captured a moment in time that he outlived, a more chaotic way of life changed in the name of urban renewal, postwar homogenization, and upward mobility. "Everything in New York was becoming regimented," Weegee observed about the difference in his milieu between the 1930s and the 1950s. "All TV shows had to be approved by Paddy Chayevsky. All street fights and rumbles were under the supervision of the Police Athletic League." One of my favorite pictures in the show is Weegee's sad, gentle rendering of Alfred Stieglitz on his cramped couch bed in the back of his gallery near the end of his life. A white-haired figure hanging on past his time, a small, fierce John Marin oil on the ledge behind him, some books in the corner: an American original photographed by an American original, neither of whom had much use for the regimentation and pieties of the new world order.

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KAREN WILKIN

David Smith: Two into Three Dimensions

DAVID SMITH, WHOSE NAME IS SYNONYMOUS with American sculpture in steel, insisted that he "belonged with painters." He often began his sculptures like paintings, arranging elements flat on white rectangles painted on his studio floor, but he didn't mean that his sculpture was literally picture-like. Rather, he meant that he believed much of the best modern sculpture was made by painters—Picasso, Matisse, and Degas—and that he found the work of his painter friends—Adolph Gottlieb, Kenneth Noland, Helen Frankenthaler, and Robert Motherwell—more stimulating than the American sculpture of his day. Smith's desire to fuse painting and sculpture in colored structures that would, he said, "beat either one" led him to experiment continuously with a variety of materials and patinas, and with painting his sculptures. He wanted his stainless steel constructions to be seen outdoors, so that their gleaming surfaces would reflect the changing colors of landscape and sky.

All his life, Smith drew and painted prodigiously, and while his most inventive, powerful, ambitious works are his sculptures, it is impossible to isolate them from his achievements in other media, just as it is impossible to isolate any one sculpture from the entire trajectory of his career. His scrupulously recorded dates reveal that he worked on many different sculptures at the same time, each a development of the diverse implications of its fellows and precedents, to be assigned later to a coherent series. He worked simultaneously in different media, using drawing, painting, or collage to recharge himself after working in steel—and vice versa. The result? An enormous, unignorable body of work in two dimensions that includes intimate Surrealist dramas, expressive gestural abstractions, bold figure studies, and cool geometric constructions, executed in everything from home-brewed egg ink to spray paint on canvas. Some are fully realized works of art, some expedient notations and some, as Smith put it, "studies for sculpture, sometimes what sculpture is, sometimes what sculpture can never be."

Smith's paintings and drawings are increasingly exhibited, yet more than thirty years and several retrospectives after his death, one important aspect of his work remains all but unknown: a large and varied group of relief sculptures. Ranging from disturbing narratives in cast bronze to expressively worked ceramic plaques to playful assemblages of unexpected materials, they are testimony both to Smith's changing

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concerns and his recurring obsessions. He considered relief a significant part of his activity, expending, for example, more than three years in the late 1930s on the *Medals for Dishonor*, fifteen bronze reliefs encapsulating passionate anti-war, anti-fascist sentiments. When the United States entered World War II, he offered his abilities as a relief-maker to the war effort, "to make medallions to be awarded for extremely meritorious war production service in industry." His anti-war views hadn't changed; he simply hoped to continue to produce sculpture during these difficult years. (As a persuasive point, Smith wrote, with a curious mixture of proletarian solidarity and condescension: "I know workmen, their vision, because between college years I worked on Studebaker's production line and later on ship repair in Brooklyn harbor. Therefore I know what my art must be to reach them.")

Smith's offer was refused, although he was commissioned to design some civilian commemorative medals after the war. He turned again to relief around 1956–57, in a series of abstract bronze plaques circulated as a Museum of Modern Art touring exhibition in 1961. Since then, except for the *Medals for Dishonor*, Smith's reliefs have rarely been seen, still less considered as a coherent part of his oeuvre. Yet they constitute a challenging, complex body of work that not only mines the same rich emotional vein as his sculptures, but is formally and iconographically pivotal to the evolution of his work as a whole.

Smith became a sculptor through the medium of relief. On arriving in New York, in 1926, he enrolled at the Art Students League to study painting, most importantly with Jan Matulka, a Czech Cubist and former student of Hans Hofmann. Matulka encouraged his students to separate shapes with strongly differentiated textures; Smith responded by making exaggerated collages, affixing objects to his canvases. "The painting developed into raised levels from the canvas," he wrote. "Gradually, the canvas became the base and the painting was a sculpture."

The process recapitulates the evolution of constructed sculpture from Cubist painting to collage to construction with fragile materials to construction in metal, but Smith was essentially forced to find his way on his own. There was no teacher of sculpture as committed to modernism as Matulka in New York in the 1920s nor were many examples of vanguard sculpture to be seen. The modernist work that would affect Smith most was in its infancy—Picasso and González didn't begin to make open constructions in metal until 1928—and little modernist art of any kind was exhibited in New York in the 1920s. Smith's former wife, the sculptor Dorothy Dehner, recalled those formative years: "We looked at everything we could see. We were hungry."

This included a good deal of non-modernist art and even non-art. That Smith frequented both the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Natural History is confirmed by allusions in his work and by notebook images of Egyptian tomb furnishings, medieval household objects, antique musical instruments, weapons, Chinese bronzes, and prehistoric bird skeletons. He studied African art when he was commis-

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sioned to make bases for an important collection. News about radical contemporary art—European art—came mostly from French art magazines, which Smith saw thanks to his friend, the Russian emigré painter-connoisseur-private dealer, John Graham, who knew an impressive cross-section of the European avant-garde, including Picasso, González, and the Surrealists, travelled regularly to Paris, and could be relied on for information about the latest experimental art. Around 1930, Graham gave Smith issues of *Cahiers d'art* with illustrations of welded metal sculpture by Picasso and González, irrevocably changing the young American's direction. By 1932, Smith had already begun to make freestanding sculptures, combining wood, wire, stone, and coral; in 1933, inspired by the photographs in *Cahiers d'art*, he made his first welded sculptures, almost certainly the first of their kind made in the U.S.

Smith knew how to weld because of the stint at the Studebaker factory cited in his proposal to the Defense Department. He later claimed that his aesthetic had been influenced by this experience: " . . . my beginning before I knew about art had already been conditioned to the machine—the part of the whole, by addition. . . . " Whether or not the assembly line had prepared Smith for the idea of collaged, constructed sculpture, the notion of making art with industrial methods and materials appealed deeply to him, both as a declaration of being modern and as a means of arriving at new kinds of sculptural form. "The material called iron or steel I hold in high respect," Smith wrote. "What it can do in arriving at a form economically, no other material can do. The metal itself possesses little art history. What associations it possesses are those of this century: power, structure, movement, progress, suspension, brutality."

Working in steel allowed Smith a new formal freedom and released a new ambition in him, but he neither stopped exploring other materials and disciplines, nor ceased responding to an astonishing variety of sources. His notes from a yearlong trip to Europe, in the 1930s, reveal his omnivorous appetite for Greek sculpture, Egyptian and Sumerian artifacts, and Northern Renaissance painting. Often, particularly in his early work, it is simple to track the influence of specific works of art—and sometimes non-art—on the impressionable young artist, who expressed his admiration for some precedents and issued challenges to others. Anything from ancient or modern painting and sculpture to popular magazine photographs to the natural world could trigger Smith's imagination and unleash his private demons or his most lyrical impulses. His art is informed, often simultaneously, by the work of his contemporaries and predecessors, by vernacular objects and images, by landscape forms, by weapons, and more. Smith's lifelong dialogue with a wealth of stimuli parallels a lively conversation among his own works, between individual sculptures, between groups of sculptures, and between his efforts in both two and three dimensions. In this context, his little known reliefs gain enormous importance, as an independent body

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of work spanning most of his career that, at the same time, is intimately related to everything else that he did. In a sense, relief is the "missing link" in Smith's varied oeuvre, bridging the gap between his painting or drawing and his sculpture. His well-documented working method of starting sculptures on the floor is itself a kind of relief-making, transformed and fully expanded into three dimensions. Similarly, his spray paintings and drawings of the late 1950s and early 1960s imply the absence of relief, since they are made by layering elements against a ground, spraying over the configuration and then removing this transitory construction to reveal the ghost of the vanished relief construction.

Smith often composed his reliefs as he composed his drawings and paintings, spreading discrete images across a field. In his early bronze reliefs, these images are often rendered with an explicitness he usually reserved for works on paper or canvas. The nearest relatives of the delicately modelled symbolic figures of the *Medals for Dishonor* are to be found not in Smith's sculptures of the period, but in his drawings and prints—except for some small, expressively modelled bronzes of the 1940s, which treat similar themes of threat and carnage, but derive their urgency more from the action of the hand on malleable material than from disquieting subject matter. The harpies and skeletons, ravished nudes and cannons of the *Medals* draw upon precedents as diverse as Renaissance medallions, British commemorative medals, Sumerian seal stones, a medical textbook, and Picasso, reconstituted and sometimes subverted by Smith as disturbing personal allusions. These motifs, made explicit in the *Medals for Dishonor,* recur throughout his work in other media as undercurrents, apparently subsumed by formal issues. Dehner once observed that she thought that abstraction appealed to Smith as a disguise, a way of making use of his strongest feelings without revealing himself completely.

A similar process of abstraction and concealment occurs within the development of relief as a discipline within the larger context of Smith's evolution, in tandem with a related shift that occurs in his freestanding sculpture after about 1950. His expressive constructions embody personal myths identical to those he explored in the 1930s and 1940s, here transformed into confrontational structures utterly divorced from conventional representation, but still powerfully evocative of animate presence. Smith's bronze plaques from the 1950s (and one suggestive relief from 1939) similarly transform the brutal themes of the *Medals for Dishonor* into non-specific images that retain the character of the symbolic figures and settings of the *Medals* but eliminate their narrative detail. Acknowledging this connection between the totemic, angular configurations of Smith's abstract reliefs and the *Medals*' symbolic figures also affects the way we read his abstract brushstroke drawings of the 1950s. Unlike Smith's earlier notations for potentially buildable objects, these loose, calligraphic images seem initially to be independent, "pure," and abstract, but the stacked configurations of the reliefs confirm that the drawings still allude to notions of assembly and

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construction. The reliefs make explicit that both the drawings' ranks of floating strokes and Smith's vertically poised, alert sculptures of the period retain a memory of the vigilant figure.

If the imagery and character of the bronze reliefs of the mid-fifties embody Smith's preoccupations of the period, their modest scale does not. Obviously, making reliefs, like drawing or painting, was a restful alternative to the labor of making large steel sculptures. (That casting reliefs in bronze allowed the result of a single effort to be multiplied was undoubtedly appealing, too.) Like painting or drawing, relief required hand gestures, rather than full body movement, and eliminated the need to consider how things might be supported. But relief had a unique advantage—to a sculptor—over working on paper or canvas: it was intensely physical and tactile. Relief replaced the disembodied marks of drawing or painting with *real*, albeit weightless, forms.

The "intermedate" character of relief allowed Smith to indulge fully his desire for color in sculpture; a group of extraordinary painted mixed-media reliefs from the mid-1950s explores virtually unprecedented chromatic harmonies and variations of texture. Their soft-edged, organic forms—literally bones and shaped wood—have cognates in the nearly contemporaneous bronze plaques, yet although the polychromed constructions were made by adding part to part, rather than by modelling or incising, just as Smith's freestanding sculptures were, he seems to have thought of them primarily as *paintings*, imposing color with a lack of inhibition and, often, a taste for abrupt contrasts, that have few equivalents in his sculptures. Some explore elegant harmonies of matte near-monochromes; others, head-on collisions of shiny near-primaries. Some are close-valued and subtle, while others clash emphatically. Even though their robust supporting surfaces reprise the canvas "bases" of the transitional constructions Smith made when he was Matulka's student (implying a future existence as fully freestanding objects), their brilliant polychromy subverts to these implications. Layers of glossy automotive enamel, Smith's preferred paint for outdoor sculptures, overwhelm their spatial articulations, making their bulk seem almost coincidental and making the thick base panels into sturdy grounds for painting events, however dramatically inflected. Shifts in color disrupt our perceptions of projecting forms and changes in level, in contrast to Smith's freestanding sculptures, where color either enhances and clarifies structure or amalgamates complexities.

The equivocal nature of relief released a spirit of playfulness in Smith, most dramatically in an undated, probably late series, made of off-the-shelf frying pans. He filled each one with an "omelet" of plaster poured over an assortment of unnameable steel objects, the surface further animated by the contrast of matte plaster, weathered metal, and gold-tinged varnish. Lighthearted parodies of such Cubist reliefs as Picasso's celebrated shelf with its bread and sausage, Smith's frying pans also read as genial nose-thumbing at Pop Art's ubiquitous food imagery of the early 1960s. But despite their vernacular associations and their

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throwaway air, they are also oddly reminiscent of Edgar Degas's reclining bather, *The Tub*, c. 1886–89, albeit with obvious differences of intent and scale. Like the metal forms in Smith's frying pans, the torso and shoulders of Degas's bather are sliced and submerged by an opaque horizontal plane, contained by a dish-like surround; like *The Tub*, Smith's frying pans are at once disturbingly literal and extremely inventive.

Often, Smith incorporated relief elements wholesale into freestanding sculptures, as signposts, punctuation, or carriers of specific meanings. In the 1940s, he arranged them, as though on a display rack, or placed them against vertical "walls," like pictures hung in miniature dwellings. In some works, he applied relief medallions as focal points, positioning them to shift viewpoints and perspective. Perhaps the most seemingly straightforward but provocative of these inclusions were in Smith's only commissioned sculpture, *Guard Rail*, 1956–57, now apparently lost. In it, he set five existing plaques face up on knee-high "stalks," an unusual presentation that invites comparison with Jackson Pollock's practice of working on the floor. This horizontal placement reprises Smith's own process of working on his reliefs, flat on a worktable, but what is perhaps more interesting, it contradicts relief's traditional association with wall-hung paintings.

In the early part of his career, Smith seems to have used relief to discover new aspects of images already explored as drawings or as freestanding sculptures. A 1937 construction improvises on an everyday studio experience, recorded in a drawing of the same year—a photographer's visit to document one of Smith's sculptures. The wiry, linear sculpture "collages" together disparate perceptions—the photographer, his tripod and lights, his hat, a studio table, and a sculpture being photographed—to make a new, arresting object not immediately recognizable as having any anecdotal content. Yet in a relief of 1945, Smith once again made explicit the image that had originally triggered his interest, and thought enough of the result to include it in *Guard Rail*.

Smith's later reliefs, the abstract bronzes and richly worked ceramic plaques of the 1950s, seem to be self-sufficient meditations on qualities of surface and shape particular to their discipline, but they, too, are linked to paintings and drawings of the period. The rich surfaces of the reliefs could be described as solidifying the linear flourishes of Smith's canvases and works on paper, or conversely, the paintings and drawings could be said to turn the dense, inflected surfaces of the reliefs into disembodied, fluctuating expanses. The aggressive physicality of the reliefs, in turn, suggests that these implacable, frontal, all-over canvases are less closely related to Pollock's example (which the sculptor obviously knew thoroughly) than to Smith's own sculptural obsessions. The scrawled surfaces of the near-monochrome paintings seem tactile, rather than optical, so that each canvas stamps itself out as a confrontational object, rather like a vertical sculpture with a crusted, elaborated surface. This dialogue between two and three dimensions continues in

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a group of richly textured "heads," made between 1955 and 1957, rather like dense, complex reliefs on vertical supports, at once reminiscent of liturgical objects and industrial artifacts.

Issues inherent to relief inform all of Smith's sculptures. They are admittedly closely related to painting issues—proof, perhaps that he did "belong with painters"—but they are expressed in tactile, physical ways that have little to do with painting. Much of the expressiveness of Smith's sculpture is intimately related to touch, to how elements join, to what projects—however slightly—and what retreats. These are issues of three-dimensional articulation in space—*sculptural*, not *pictorial* concerns. This is not to deny that Smith's conception of three-dimensional articulation in space was radically different from traditional sculptural precedents. Picasso and González's constructions, of course, prefigure Smith's, but while he was obviously deeply indebted to these pioneers, when he made his first welded metal sculptures, in 1933, Picasso and González had themselves been working in this "new tradition" for only five years. Smith was no mere disciple; he not only learned perfectly the language of open construction that Picasso and González invented, but expanded its vocabulary and altered its syntax. Smith's constructed sculptures are less bound by the character of existing forms than his predecessors' efforts. His upright works may confront us and engage our attention like individuals with forceful personalities, but they evoke the figure more by sheer verticality than by alluding to the forms and proportions of the body. It's questionable whether Smith was ever an abstract artist, but his constructions are generally more elusive than Picasso's or González's. It is all but impossible to anticipate alternative views of one of Smith's sculptures from any other viewpoint. End views are often especially surprising; the implied volume of a frontal view, for example, may dissolve or collapse when seen from the side.

The distinctive character of these end views is linked with Smith's practice of making reliefs, particularly abstract reliefs. Traditional figurative relief, which aims, like traditional painting, at illusionism, relies, similarly, on conventional perspective and demands to be considered from a single, frontal viewpoint. End views are meaningless, since they reveal the compression of forms assumed to be further away from the viewer, which destroys illusion. Abstraction liberates end views, making them potentially as significant as the "privileged" frontal view by freeing individual elements from logical relationships that would make them legible as parts of a coherent, albeit fictive deep space. Smith's most compelling freestanding sculptures could be described as four-sided reliefs. Although we can often see through sections of these constructions, and although each side is obviously related to the whole, each is distinct and nearly autonomous. We must rely on memory, as we do with architecture, to gauge the relationships between what we can see from a given viewpoint and any other part of the sculpture.

The relationship of projecting elements to their background, an issue apparently unique to relief, is a crucial one in Smith's freestanding

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works. In traditional illusionistic relief, elements close to the viewer often project aggressively, while those further away are subsumed by an amorphous background in a tactile version of the way atmospheric perspective in painting blurs distant forms. In abstract relief, the supporting plane may engulf what is placed on top of it or act simply as a neutral support. Smith usually treated the background plane of his reliefs like the surface of a stretched canvas—a continuous, at times irregular support, against which he disposed discretely modelled forms. Sometimes, he inflected and warped that support, or altered the relationship of projection and background with changes in color. In his freestanding sculptures, a memory of the painted rectangle on the studio floor where the composition began often survives, a fictive transparent plane against and through which sculptural elements project.

These persistent, intricately twined connections remind us that Smith cared more about the provocative relationships that engendered his works than the distinctions between them, even though he always strove to make each new painting or sculpture or relief more intense and powerful than what preceded it. "The works you see are segments of my work life," he wrote. "If you prefer one work over another, it is your privilege, but it does not interest me. The work is a statement of identity, it comes from a stream, it is related to my past works, the three or four works in process and the work yet to come."

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BERT CARDULLO

Dangerous Liaisons, or Sex, Lies, and Burlesque

THE "YOUTH" FILM CONTINUES TO BE WITH US, except that in its American form it might better be called the Generation-X movie. One distinction between such films about young people and most previous "youth culture" movies from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s is that the ones arriving today are being made by people the same age as the characters they are portraying. Another distinction, related to the previous one, is that many of the older "youth" pictures were patent studio moves to cash in on the sociopolitical, psychosexual, or pharmacomusical temper of the times. The Generation-X films, by contrast, are independent, low-budget reactions against the extravagance and disingenuousness of Hollywood, past and present; they are small or compact in physical scale, unlike multimillion-dollar studio behemoths, but large in their reality quotient, not to speak of their artfulness. Lastly, but not least importantly, these minimalist movies all feature directors who have written their own screenplays—really, resonantly written them.

Twenty-six-year-old Kevin Smith is the writer-director of *Chasing Amy*, the third installment in his loose "New Jersey Trilogy," whose first two parts had the more prosaic titles *Clerks* and *Mallrats*. They also had little more than energetic cleverness—bathroom and bedroom humor combined with *faux*-philosophical discourse—at their cores. *Chasing Amy* has plenty of clever conversation and its share of bawdy humor, but it also has something that the previous two pictures lacked: the ability to accommodate genuine feeling. For this is a romantic comedy with a contemporary twist, and it is the twist in the boy-meets-girl formula that lays the characters open to deeper emotional inspection. To be sure, *Clerks* and *Mallrats* featured their boys and their girls, but the heavy emphasis in these two movies was on somewhat sophomoric male bonding against the exaggerated threat of female capriciousness. We know we're in for a more rewarding ride in *Chasing Amy* when: (1) we quickly deduce that there will be no Amy in the film; (2) we realize that the chief male character, Holden MacNeil, is meant to be the teenaged Holden Caulfield from Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* ten years—and, at the same time, an entire generation—later; and (3) when we hear Holden's sidekick and business partner, Banky Edwards, seriocomically compare their relationship to that of Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

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Holden and Banky are in the comic-book business, not kid stuff but material targeted for their generation. They write and draw the series *Bluntman* out of their office-cum-apartment in Red Bank, then peddle their wares at comic-book conventions in Manhattan and elsewhere. These two guys were graduated from the same high school in 1988, which puts them at about twenty-seven years old; moreover, Holden and Banky have known each other since the third grade, and they're still together after twenty years. A comedy team they are not, exactly, but they are a study in contrasts, as are all such teams: Holden the cool, suavely good-looking, open-minded "grown-up" of the two, and Banky the quirky, deadpan humorist with pinched looks to go along with his parochial views.

Into this picture comes Alyssa Jones, herself a native of Red Bank and a comic-book artist who writes her own strip. Holden is introduced to Alyssa at a club in New York, and this cute and squeaky-voiced yet strong-willed young blond just happens to be his enterprising intellectual match. Naturally, in this romantic comedy, Holden is attracted to her sexually as well as intellectually; "unnaturally," Alyssa turns out to be a lesbian, and a sexually opportunistic one at that. She doesn't hate men, she says; she simply has no romantic interest in them. But, predictably, this is not the end of the story: it's the beginning of a series of spirited conversations on the nature of gender, sexual orientation, and modern love.

Holden's discovery of Alyssa's lesbianism paradoxically enhances his attraction to her, for she becomes something of a forbidden item to him, particularly when Banky vociferously warns him against pursuing any kind of relationship with this woman. Banky argues that (a) Holden is not going to get Alyssa into bed, and that (b) the amount of time his roommate and artistic collaborator spends with this "dyke" is destroying *their*—Banky and Holden's—relationship. Nonetheless, Holden persists in chasing Alyssa, and she obliges him with several amicable dates filled with searching talk of the aforementioned kind. These two plainly *like* each other, though for Holden the like is quickly turning into romantic love as Alyssa responds with compassionately aggressive honesty to such questions as "Where's the phallic penetration in lesbian sex?"

Let there be no mistake, however: there isn't the slightest, homophobic suggestion that Holden is "saving" his companion from the terrible or disgusting fate of lesbianism. The anti-gay comments, most of them harmlessly amusing, are left to the partial Banky, who manages despite himself to engage in an uproarious lament with Alyssa about physical injuries each has incurred during oral sex. It is Holden's sheer persistence in his desire, not any macho political or redemptive religious motivation on his part, that finally touches Alyssa. And, in response to his declaration one night that he loves her, she initially berates this heterosexual for betraying their friendship, then summarily goes to bed with him—her first such experience with a man, she says.

Holden wants to know why, at this particular point, Alyssa has

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switched to men, and her reply is convincing—in fact, almost too pat to be true. She claims that she hasn't necessarily switched from females to males, she has just selected Holden over everyone else. Alyssa argues that she has come to men on her own terms, as the result of keeping open a romantic option with the masculine gender at the same time as she indulged her affection for women; she has not allowed herself to be programmed into loving men from the start. This explanation of Alyssa's newfound love for Holden satisfies him, but it's not completely true. She *has* slept with other men in the past, and Banky is the one who digs up the dirt on her, for he's certain that what he calls "the adventure of loving a lesbian" will end badly for his best friend—or does Banky want this affair to end badly, as well as prematurely, for his own latently homosexual reasons?

Happily, we don't get a flat answer to this question, nor is Alyssa's heterosexual love for Holden ever discredited. Confronted with her lie by him, Alyssa admits the truth: that Holden is not her first heterosexual lover, and that since her teens she has been less a lesbian than a bisexual, with an emphasis on the double sexual gratification of such an orientation. Ironically, she told the white lie for the sentimental reason that she wanted Holden to feel special as the first man ever to have intercourse with her. He, for his part, reacts to Alyssa's confession in a similar, emotionally conditioned manner: because of her promiscuous past with other men, he maintains, they cannot be a "normal couple." With their split begins Holden's "chasing of Amy," which is a metaphor for the pursuit of something you've mistakenly thrown away.

So hard does he chase that he's even ready to try a little bisexuality, so that he can get the kind of experience he's been missing in comparison with Alyssa. That, at least, is what Holden says in *Chasing Amy*'s penultimate scene, where he proposes three-way sex to Banky and Alyssa "in order to satisfy everybody." After a kiss on the lips from Holden, Banky reluctantly agrees to participate, but Alyssa flatly refuses with the assertion that she has put her promiscuous past behind her. She loves only *Holden*, she insists, but now she must leave him. Which she does after slapping his face and telling his roommate and colleague, "He's all yours again." Comically, Banky is relieved—less at getting Holden back, however, than at not having to go to bed with him.

Throughout this scene at Holden and Banky's place, a fishbowl has been visible sitting atop another fishbowl of sorts, a television. And this may be Smith's wry comment on the insular nature of his own film, on the obsession of his characters with self and self-satisfaction in love or sex or both, without reference to larger matters of the spirit, the body politic, even the universal void. Such an obsession is not so strange, of course, in a "youth" movie, particularly one that focuses on a romance between a heterosexual man and a lesbian or bisexual woman. Still, a comparable American picture from the fifties to the seventies would have included some mention of events and circumstances beyond the purely personal.

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Chasing Amy might well have ended with its penultimate scene and a shot of that self-contained fishbowl, but Smith tacks on a kind of epilogue which takes place one year later. Banky and Holden have split up, and the latter is still "chasing Amy," having gone so far as to give this title to his new, solo comic; but, unsurprisingly, Holden runs into his old friend at a comics convention in New York, not far from a table where Alyssa is promoting a collection of her own comic strips. Smith has contrived to gather back together the members of this triangle for three reasons: to show that Holden and Banky have grown out of their boyhood friendship; to indicate that Alyssa has returned for the time being to lesbianism; and to make the point, during her and Holden's polite but affecting conversation, that these two former lovers are not going to reunite, as they would in a conventional romantic comedy.

However, it's arguable that we could have deduced all this from the next-to-last scene of *Chasing Amy*. The epilogue that Smith has added seems anticlimactic, then, although it may be worth having for its resonant coda alone: during it, while Holden leaves the large hall, Alyssa quietly informs her new lesbian partner that he was just some guy she once knew; then the camera slowly pulls back at the comics convention to absorb her into the anonymous yet exhibitionist crowd, as the picture ends. The issue of the characters' sexuality and ultimate pairing off has not been resolved, and perhaps this is the principal achievement of *Chasing Amy*: that it makes us realize, again unlike conventional romantic comedies, that the real story of the threesome—now the three individuals—Holden, Banky, and Alyssa is just beginning, not ending. And that this story won't find its resolution in any autographed, self-suffused comic book.

The performances in this film are themselves continuations of a sort, since each of the main characters also appeared in *Mallrats*. Jason Lee is darkly, impudently funny here as Banky, Holden's second—a role he performed in their comic-book artistry as well, where he served as the ink tracer of his confrère's original drawings. The goateed Ben Affleck is less good as Holden because more mannered, which is to say that he thinks too much as an actor about what he has to do instead of simply doing it on cue. This flaw in his performance is most evident, of course, when he is listening to others, especially Alyssa during one of her strident monologues. Joey Lauren Adams plays this young woman like a human sexual barometer, which is a compliment given the nature of her role in *Chasing Amy*. My only objection is that her brittle assertiveness occasionally becomes monotonous, as if Adams were trying too hard to play against her demure good looks. Fortunately, this actress is helped out by David Pirner's loose, inviting musical score, if not by David Klein's undistinguished color cinematography. Sprightly, revisionist romantic comedy that it is, *Chasing Amy* had to be in color, but its color scheme could have gone much farther toward coloring our perceptions of the characters, their loves, and the world they have in common with each of us.

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Paradoxically, the color cinematography (by Tony Hettinger) in Neil LaBute's first film, *In the Company of Men*, is so cool and spare, so frigid and sterile, in rendering the familiar habitats of modern corporate America that it amply colors our perceptions of the three main characters, their love-hates, and particularly the work world they have in common with many if not all of us. Here is color that in retrospect seems to have been black and white, so stark are the ideas that it expresses. LaBute, also a (Chicago-based) dramatist, has expressed these ideas, or similar ones, before in his stage plays, each of which deals in its own way with the subjects of sexual perversity, the war between the sexes, bigotry, and sheer Machiavellian evil in America today. Now he has written a screenplay, as well as directed it, and in doing so, LaBute is following a path pursued by a notable predecessor of his—and notable influence on both his writing style and thematic concerns—David Mamet.

Himself Chicago-based and, for the last ten years, a screenwriter and movie director in addition to being one of this country's most accomplished playwrights, Mamet created his first film as an *auteur* in 1987 with *House of Games*, which bore the same relationship to his career as *In the Company of Men* does to LaBute's. Like the language of Mamet's best plays, the dialogue in *House of Games* is taut, highly charged, almost ritualistically abstracted. Moreover, the idea behind the picture—that the exploitative nature of contemporary interpersonal relationships, especially romantic ones, is the byproduct of a brutally competitive capitalistic economy in which commodity value alone wins out in the end over human emotional needs and spiritual aspirations—is the thesis that drives nearly every Mamet drama.

Similarly, LaBute's first motion picture intertwines the themes of sexual objectification and rampant materialism in a way best suggested by the title of his latest play, *Ravishes*, which takes a deadly look at the underground world of the pornography industry; and he uses language as a cutting, heightened weapon in *In the Company of Men*, just as he has done in his plays. LaBute has revealed that the inspiration for *In the Company of Men* came from Restoration comedy, and one can hear it. For the diction of this writer-director's characters is metaphorical, when it is not explicitly obscene, like that of the Restoration wits. Even as their habitual use of similes was unconsciously indicative of the volatile or slippery political order in England under the newly restored King Charles II, LaBute's white-collar managers unwittingly speak the figurative language of amoral, late twentieth-century America, where financial success is deviously equated with fulfillment in life (in this movie, both money and life "exist for the taking"), which itself is associated with emotional if not physical violence ("Life is for the *taking*.") Furthermore, the machinations of big business have become conflated in these characters' minds or mouths with the manipulations of little women and other lesser beings, just as the clever, but often subtextually cruel, use of language by landless young aristocrats during the Restoration was an intellectually opportunistic means of gaining class privilege and, along

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with it, female favor in the increasingly commerce-driven, parlimentary-controlled society of London.

Young executives of a huge Midwestern corporation, Chad and Howard are being sent at the start of the film on a six-week sojourn to a regional office in Fort Wayne, Indiana, for an undescribed business project. We never learn what they "do" or what their company makes, but that's part of the picture's point. These days, operating philosophy and business technique are the same across corporations, no matter what they sell—which, as a result, make their management employees interchangeable, faceless, programmed only to show profit. The profit-minded Chad and Howard were college friends and were graduated almost at the same time—ten years before we meet up with them—yet the clean-cut, bespectacled Howard outranks the sinuous, cigarette-smoking Chad at the office: the former is the director of the Fort-Wayne venture, while the latter is its marketing manager.

But Chad is clearly the dominant member of this duo, as he shows when, during their flight from Chicago, he obstreperously complains both about the beastly competition of the workplace and about the bitchy aggressiveness of women within it, especially as they have become empowered by affirmative-action and sexual-harassment laws. "We've got to do something about it," Chad angrily avows, and all the more so, he maintains, because his girlfriend recently dumped him without even an explanation. So he hatches a revenge-plot to the milder-mannered but similarly disgruntled Howard: in the new city to which they've been posted, each will woo the same susceptible young woman, showering her with attention in order to persuade her of his seriousness. Then, at the end of their six-week stay, both men will abruptly drop the woman and have her misery to chortle over for the rest of their lives. Chad argues that such a ruthless act will restore dignity to his life as a man; when the future brings its inevitable disappointments, he tells his colleague in a bar, at least each of the two will be able to say, "They never got me like we got her."

The cinematic style of these early scenes epitomizes the editing (by Joel Plotch) throughout *In the Company of Men*: there is little of it. Scene after scene is placed before us, usually in full shot, sometimes from an imposing low angle or a diminishing high one, and gets played in one continuous take. It should be clear by now that such a shooting style on the part of a theater artist-turned-filmmaker derives partially from his work for the stage. But in LaBute's case, something additional is at work, and that is his preference, in his own words, for "films where the story drives the visuals, not vice versa." In the case of *In the Company of Men*, this means placing the viewer in a voyeuristic position toward the screen by making him aware, through the long takes often of two-shots, of the process of *looking*, of his intimate intrusion on the lives of two male characters who themselves intrude on the life of a third, female figure.

The story of this movie also drives its visuals in the sense that, to reiterate, that story is itself driven by, and partly about, language. *In the*

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Company of Men is a picture of *verbal* violence, not the physical kind that you can find gratuitously displayed in far too many American films. Hence, for dramatic contrast, LaBute makes Christine, the girl whom Chad and Howard choose to victimize, stone deaf in addition to being bright, winning, and beautiful. This makes her more of a pawn in their game, of course, because she cannot hear what they say. But Christine's deafness is designed to do something else in the film, and I don't mean merely make us empathize even more with her in her plight. For this young woman may be deaf, but in fact she is less disabled than Howard and Chad, because in a sense she can hear on frequencies that their constricted minds cannot even imagine. Christine may be more vulnerable than these two male predators, then, but she is also more vibrant in that she has had to tap every resource inside herself with which to handle the experiences of an otherwise sentient life.

Christine is a highly competent typist in the large building to which Chad and Howard are assigned. When Chad learns the truth about her—not only that she has been totally deaf since the age of eight, but also that she is extremely sweet and accommodating—he's momentarily disappointed yet chooses to proceed with his scheme to humiliate her. Like the dramatic plotter he is, Chad coldly calls Christine's niceness an "odd twist"; and like the cruel son-of-a-bitch he incarnates, Chad exaggeratedly makes fun of her earnest attempts to speak: "She's got one of those voices like Flipper," he remarks to Howard as he convinces his alarmed but secretly excited boss that this is the girl whom they should seduce and abandon. "You should hear her working to put the simplest sounds together—squeaking and squealing and shooting spit all over the place."

Soon both men are dating the unsuspecting Christine, who is pleasantly surprised to be getting all this attention (and who somewhat guiltily thinks that neither of her two suitors knows about the other): gifts, dinner, movies. It is Chad, however, who really turns on the charm with false flattery, two-faced solicitude, and unctuous expressions of affection. And, as you might guess, it is Chad who gets the girl, not Howard, who had quickly begun to compete with his colleague for Christine's favors and falls in love with the woman despite himself—despite his complicity in the dirty trick against her, despite the fact that she has sex with Chad but not him. Even as Howard is vying for Christine, his relationship with Chad is becoming competitive in another sense: the business project in Fort Wayne is going badly and the former man fears that he will be demoted on account of his failure of leadership. What we learn is that Chad has been orchestrating this failure, through sabotage of his boss's efforts, for he jealously desires Howard's better job.

Moreover, Chad has even been orchestrating the other fellow's failure in love at the same time that he has been realizing his own hatred of, or chauvinism toward, women. For Chad had lied to Howard about his recent troubles with females in order to lure his colleague into the

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deadly and time-consuming trap of pursuing Christine. We find this out toward the end of *In the Company of Men* when Howard, sick over both his imminent demotion and the consummate duping of Christine, visits Chad in his Chicago apartment, only to discover that the latter happily continues to live with Suzanne, the woman who he claimed had jilted him. Yet, as Chad well knows by now, Howard is not so innocent, either, for earlier he had betrayed his fellow male by revealing their churlish sport to Christine in a desperate attempt to win her for himself.

Thus at the end of *In the Company of Men*, the rug has been pulled out not only from under Christine, as planned, but also from under Howard—as planned. The last time we encounter him, he has flown back to Fort Wayne in order to seek reconciliation with Christine, only to be silently rebuffed by her. In contrast to our witnessing of Howard's earlier, ingratiating attempts to communicate with Christine by means of sign language, we hear him importunately screaming "Listen!" at her several times here; then, for the first time in the film, we hear as well as see a person from her point of view: which is to say we see Howard frantically mouthing the word "Listen," but we hear nothing. In other words, or in a single image, he has been rendered grotesquely speechless.

As for Chad, no such comeuppance befalls him. When confronted by the loving Christine with the enormity of his deception, he callously laughs and asks her what he has planned to ask her all along: "How do you feel right now, knowing what you know?" The irony of this question, of course, is not only that Chad will ask it again, in double-edged form, of his simultaneous co-conspirator and twin victim, Howard, during their final meeting, but that Chad must ask it at all—because he himself feels nothing. The delicate savagery of *In the Company of Men* features no poetic justice for this man, for, as LaBute has surely intuited, justice is often just that: poetic and not real. Chad's evil not only goes unpunished, as evil frequently does in reality, but it also goes unrecognized by him at the same time as it even gets rewarded. Christine survives, it's true, but her virtue is hardly rewarded, even though her goodness does triumph somewhat over the lesser evil represented by Howard.

Chad is played by Aaron Eckhart, who can act, and who shows his ability here by handling the two tracks of this capital opportunist with utter, and therefore frightening, naturalness: Chad the actor who does a considerable amount of performing; and Chad the character who drops his mask to reveal the face of inveterate, if not banal, evil. This is a man so conscious of himself and his own needs that he has ceased to have a conscience, which makes him less than human and consequently difficult to impersonate convincingly or uncomically. But Eckhart succeeds—indeed, to such an extent that he creates an imbalance in the picture, for Matt Malloy's performance as Howard does not imbue this character with enough strength to make him anything more than a stooge for Chad. Malloy had the easier part but failed to color Howard

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sufficiently, such that the metamorphosis he undergoes at the end is less moving than it might have been.

Stacy Edwards handles Christine's reversal and recognition with genuine skill, retaining this character's dignity even after others have robbed her of her warmth. Edwards could easily have turned Christine into a mawkish poster girl for Americans with disabilities, but she wisely chose, with LaBute's guidance, to reveal the substantial content of this woman's character rather than to flaunt the unfortunate accident of her birth or the inevitable defect of her heredity. Something similar could be said about Ken Williams' score for *In the Company of Men*: instead of being the alternately sentimental and suspenseful mood music of your typical Hollywood feature, it is highly discordant jazz with a ferocious beat, and thus true to the picture it alarmingly introduces and implacably concludes. Furthermore, LaBute uses this music only at the start of sequences, which are announced by titles like "Week Six" (plus some "weeks later," over one summer), never under the individual scenes themselves. For the first time in a moviegoer's month of Sundays, they are allowed to stand on their own, and they reward us with reverberation.

Unlike the romantic events in *Chasing Amy*, those of *In the Company of Men* reverberate beyond themselves deep into the world of commerce, as I have previously suggested. LaBute's characters are no less self-absorbed than Smith's, with the important exception of Christine; and the two films do share several themes: male bonding or misogyny, heterosexism or homophobia, the imitation and even burlesquing of such sub-genres as romantic comedy and the comedy of manners. Yet, in ways unknown to them, LaBute's characters address such wider concerns as the relationship between language and action, between evil and ego, and among work, play, and love. *In the Company of Men* is the richer picture as a result, although *Chasing Amy* is hardly bankrupt by comparison. Let's just say that, to a greater or lesser degree, each work is an exemplification of an American century characterized simultaneously by such variations on a single theme as greediness and giving, isolationism and internationalism, and self-exaltation and self-salvation. We continue to chase some Amy, in other words, at the same time as we seem to prefer the company of men.

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JOSIAH FISK

Classical Music and the Tourist Factor

THE TOWN WHERE I GREW UP was in most respects quite average. Being a New England town, it was filled with older houses, and had the obligatory white Congregational church and a town square, which like most examples of its type was quiet, pretty, and shaped nothing like a square.

When you needed supplies, you went downtown. In businesses around the square you could take a dress to be fitted, have a tooth filled, get your car fixed. You could also walk out onto a spit of land and get a view of the harbor and the sea. There were beaches nearby, and if you wanted lobsters you bought them from the local dealer or, if you were enterprising, caught them yourself.

A town like this naturally draws visitors. By the late nineteenth century, with tourism already part of the New England economy, they were a fact of life. The town's immediate attraction was its physical charm, a collaboration of natural surroundings and built environment. The deeper appeal was its authenticity. It was a town that existed for no other purpose than to be a town. Its main activities were conducted by and for its residents, and it was the residents who, for better or worse, determined its economy, politics, and character. It was not a place created for tourists, which is why the first tourists went there.

These people were of a different social class from the locals, but because most of them were *de facto* residents of the town for a period of time, their needs and interests were substantially the same. They were not a political force and affected the economy only seasonally. The inns and cottages that housed them were located out along the shore, which meant that the center of town was largely unchanged. When they did go to town, it was to buy the same sorts of supplies the locals bought.

After 1900, the artists came. Drawn by the scenery and a ready market among the summer folk, they set up shop in fishermen's shacks on the spit of land off the town square. By World War II there was an established row of galleries, along with regular summer painting classes and an annual artists' ball.

The best of these artists were by no means untalented. Their styles were representational and their reputations local, though their paintings today hang in museums and bring five-figure prices. Their success created a new reason to come to town. The result was not only an

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increase in the number of visitors but a shift in the type of visitors, since the artists attracted people who otherwise wouldn't have come. The nature of visits changed also: people looking at art were more likely to be day-trippers, less likely to be summer residents.

With the galleries drawing steady traffic, it was only natural that shops and restaurants would appear. The first shops had unusual merchandise and were geared to a sophisticated clientele. They did well, which attracted other merchants, who brought more visitors. By 1950 the fishermen whose shacks had given the place its charm had been pushed to the margins. There was no place for them amid the summer crowds, and fishy smells were bad for the tourist trade—not that fishermen could afford the rents anyway.

A generation later the older artists and shopkeepers found themselves in a similar situation, unable to compete with the more commercial merchants who had arrived to capitalize on the town's busy flow of tourists and its good reputation. Within the space of fifty years, a shed built for a fish-rendering works might have become an artist's live-in studio, an antique shop, a scented-soap store, and, by now three stories tall, a place selling trinkets with sports team insignias.

If you drive through the center of town today you will see signs of an apparently robust economy. There are over 125 businesses in the downtown area alone, more than ever before and many times what you'd expect to find in a town of 8,000. But only three sell ordinary household items. Nor will you see more than a handful of houses that have not had their ground floors converted to galleries or gift shops. The paintings have become formulaic. Some are now produced on Asian assembly lines—something the earlier tourists would have scoffed at. Most of today's crowd doesn't seem to notice the difference, and business is good. Only once in the last twenty years has an art gallery been replaced by an everyday type of store. A Hollywood studio was shooting a movie, and they built the store because they wanted the place to look more like a real downtown. When they left, they put back the art gallery.

Had the movie crew come thirty years earlier, they would have had less work to do, because the space where they were shooting was the hardware store. Today, the same hardware store, along with a grocery store, laundromat, and video place are in a strip mall by the train station, well away from the high-priced downtown. Perhaps in salute to the growing unreality of the tourist world that displaced it, this shopping center is called Whistlestop Mall. The name, with its small-town, long-ago overtones, fits the dingy cement-block buildings about as well as the notion of a whistlestop fits the town: if a train ever happened not to stop here, it would run straight off the track, the town being the end of the line. The name is phony, but it is quaint, and after a while phony quaintness is something that even some of the locals have come to expect.

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I've told this story at such length because it is, in essence, the story of what has happened to classical music. In the past five decades, it has gone from being a relatively insular world largely run by and for its residents—the locals, if you will—to one that is at the mercy of its tourists, most of whom do not know or care much about it and are not interested in changing that. But they do expect to be catered to, and, having succeeded in pricing the locals out of their own homes, have left the place with an economy that depends on their presence.

The line between who is a local and who is a tourist is not the same as the line between musicians and non-musicians, or professionals and non-professionals. A local is someone who lives in the world of music, not so much by virtue of activities as psychology. You are a local if music really matters to you. It's a self-selecting group, although not self-determining: there are people who listen to classical music and even people who earn their living from it who do not have a strong emotional connection with it. In this, music is no different from any other cultural endeavor, with its mercenaries, wannabes, hacks, and beautiful people.

Most musicians count as locals (particularly if you include amateurs, who have no other reason to be making music), but not all of them. At the same time, there are people with no musical training who would rather drive 100 miles to hear a favorite work than get a full night's sleep. People like that are usually locals. The locals are the people who, if music were to vanish, would not know what to do. No amount of reading or playing golf or going to flea markets would ever make up the difference for them.

It's only logical that this type of person tends to approach music in a different way from the music tourist, since they are after different things. The basic attitude of music's locals is easy to describe: they seek enjoyment through understanding. They may or may not end up mastering a practical or intellectual skill in music, and if they do, they may or may not reach a professional level, and if they do reach such a level, they still may not end up as musical professionals. The goal of understanding comes first, and how music fits their lives is a different issue.

Kindling an interest in music through understanding was the goal of music appreciation, a phenomenon that came to maturity mid-century and played a role in creating the postwar boom in regional orchestras. Music appreciation has been scorned by music writers from Virgil Thomson in the 1940s to Joseph Horowitz in the late 1980s. Both of these writers derided it as the handmaiden of musical commerce, existing only to sell records and to elevate a few selected musicians and works to sacred status. Neither Thomson nor Horowitz much cared that the music and artists being elevated were as deserving of attention as any, and rather than attempting to distinguish the promoted from the promoters they damned the whole lot.

In retrospect, it might have been better had they acknowledged that music appreciation at least proceeded from the right assumption: that

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understanding is the key to enjoying classical music. Music appreciation's fatal problem was that it gave the impression that a working understanding of music could be gotten on the cheap. In order to sidestep the hard effort, it sold people on music as a friendly, accessible art made up of loose, primitive symbols and simple action-pictures.

What music appreciation did teach was a respect for music and musicians. This could easily harden into mindless reverence, but unpalatable as it was, reverence had the advantage of protecting music's autonomy and self-determination. The average music appreciator of the postwar years might have believed that the last movement of Chopin's Piano Sonata No. 2 was about wind swirling over a graveyard, but it would not have occurred to this listener to doubt whether the piece was good music, even if personally he didn't get much out of it. That is what has changed with the tourist listener of today. The tourist listener has accepted a culture-wide invitation to junk the whole notion of greatness and authority (a move Thomson cheered) but has kept and even expanded the notion of music as a playground for moods and inspirations unhampered by technical considerations.

We should remember that the tourist listener is not, *a priori*, a listener at all. He is someone who turns to classical music only when it happens to meet a pre-existing need. Its usefulness may be a matter of setting a background mood, or projecting a cultured image, or providing a sonic texture that encourages relaxation, or validating emotional fantasies. What all of these uses do not involve—what they quite efficiently exclude—is a role for objective observation or critical thought.

It is the tourist listener who is enthralled by David Helfgott, the psychologically impaired pianist whose story inspired the David Hicks film *Shine*. By musical measures Helfgott is no concert pianist (who in his condition could be?), and critics have duly noted that it is his story and persona that draw the audiences. What fewer have noted is that Helfgott's musical ineptitude is not a failing but an essential part of his appeal. The weird incoherence and continual mutterings are testament to his struggle, while his childlike willingness to honor inappropriate applause by taking a mid-Ballade bow shows that he shares the audience's priorities: emotions matter, musical integrity is dispensable. That the two could be connected, let alone synonymous, and that they were synonymous for the people who created the music itself, is anathema to the tourist listener.

To his fans, the Rachmaninoff concerto Helfgott played for the movie soundtrack is not a work of art or even a soloist vehicle. It's a stand-in for Music, which is there to get its comeuppance. In the Helfgott equation as presented in *Shine*, music equals authoritarian/destructive father, and Helfgott's paradoxical revenge has been to win fame as a musician while mutilating one of classical music's most popular treasures and flouting not only its conventions of presentation but its entire presumption of authority.

Helfgott's tour in the wake of the film only drove the point home. Bad

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reviews gave Helfgott's wife, Gillian, the chance to portray the musical establishment as an evil empire, while fans had the opportunity to connect in person with the man they had seen portrayed on the screen (many actually thought the actor who played Helfgott would be performing). In Boston, people rushed the stage, thrusting their hands, and in some cases their babies, toward Helfgott to receive his touch. Wishful fantasy had been inseparably fused with reality. It is no accident that Helfgott's CD of the Rachmaninoff is both the very worst performance available and by far the best-selling recording of the work in history.

Whenever classical music is dragged into the limelight, whether by Helfgott or the Three Tenors or Medieval chants with synth-pop backup, critics who want to prove their broad-mindedness will claim that all the attention is good because some of the buyers will surely go on to take a greater interest in classical music. This is a little like saying that some people would surely be converted to Catholicism if the Church would only advertise that you got free wine at every service. Maybe it would work, but everyone would be better off if it didn't. The appeal of most tourist-oriented classical CDs is not merely oblique to that of general classical titles but actively opposed to it, and the listener who sets out on the journey from one mentality to the other will find his path riddled with pitfalls.

What is more likely is that the tourist listener simply buys another tourist CD, such as one featuring an assortment of slow movements with a half-naked body on the cover. For his purposes, this assortment is better than complete works: he wants a degree of predictability and uniformity, whereas most classical works are constructed around contrasts. He doesn't care what the actual pieces are or who is playing, and he is unlikely to wonder what the rest of the movements of that Mozart concerto sound like, or to see if any of the pieces are on an upcoming concert program in his area. It wouldn't occur to this listener to ask whether classical music as an entity was something worth his attention, only whether the attitude offered by the CD, as manifested in the cover art, is right for his need. He does not care, as casual record buyers once did, about owning "the best" or about getting beyond the mass-market hype and into something the crowds haven't discovered yet. He does not even care whether it is in any way true to its nature; what matters is that it be true to his. Ultimately, he doesn't recognize the existence of music beyond his own uses for it. He is buying a commodity, and the recording industry, radio stations, and increasingly the concert hall are packaging their products to fit.

The most common complaint raised about classical music today is that it has become a museum culture. This is in one sense ironic, for while classical music is collapsing, art museums are in the midst of a wave of popularity and expansion—there are now more than 1,200 of them in the U.S., up 50% in three decades. But where is this success coming from? The spontaneous urge to develop a personal viewpoint on Monet?

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The wish to come to grips with the Cubist revolution? There's some looking going on, but increasingly it is just a sideshow to shopping, schmoozing or, in a place like the Brooklyn Museum, karaoke. The gift shop is now the American art museum's backbone, contributing up to a quarter of its operating income—more than any other single source.

I once met a man who told me all about his visit to the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. He was full of enthusiasm for the gift shop beneath the sanctuary, in particular a room where they sold you crayons and paper and let you make rubbings of fake English funerary brasses. When I asked him what he and his family had thought of the cathedral itself, he was taken aback. "Oh," he said, genuinely puzzled by my question, "we didn't go upstairs."

By any demographic measure, this man was not impoverished, uneducated, or culturally backward. He was, in fact, a tenured professor of humanities. And he saw nothing odd about his behavior. What we cannot afford to overlook here is that, viewed strictly as a transaction, his visit was not only acceptable but ideal. He didn't have to bother touring a site he wasn't interested in, and the site didn't have to receive him. The site got more money and was out less in expenses than if he'd spent his two hours asking questions about the architecture and never made it to the gift shop. For his part, the man was able to say he'd helped support the cathedral and had taken his kids on a culture field trip. The kids were perfectly thrilled to have something they'd "made" and could hang on their walls. The only loser was culture itself.

The trouble with the music-as-museum metaphor is that it is too true in regard to what museums have become and not true enough in regard to what they are intended to be. It has become habit among music critics to bemoan the narrowing of the repertoire, the endless repetition of a few selected works. This is a strange complaint to make about a musical culture that, after all, is founded on the idea that extensive and repeated contact with a work is the way to understand it. New music is certainly essential (and one way to get people to like it a little better would be to program half as may pieces and play each of them twice). Rediscovering odd corners of the literature is important also. But repetition *per se* is not the problem. Either you love this music or you don't; and to love it is, among other things, to listen to it.

The problem is when the repetitions are indifferently played or indifferently heard. A professional orchestra no longer considers it a challenge to perform a Beethoven symphony, nor do most audiences consider it a challenge to listen to one. In this sense the tourist listener should not be blamed for finding many classical concerts and recordings dull. Most are of a very high caliber, but few really ask us to listen attentively. And we've had enough extreme tempos and willfully bizarre interpretations to know that they aren't the answer. It is a self-perpetuating cycle, and until we find a way to break it, the only marketable efforts will be those made for the tourists, and classical music will continue to spend more and more effort being less and less itself.

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Who is to blame? The London critic Norman Lebrecht, in his book *Who Killed Classical Music?*,[1] accuses everyone in the business: performers who charge enormous sums for routine efforts, agents as heartless as they are shameless, record companies who treat music as their own domain, to exploit as they will. He's right in the sense that the music business is disgusting. But it's only as disgusting as audiences allow, and Lebrecht, who says little about audiences, seems to think of them as well-meaning but passive. He doesn't make the connection. This is a dark, sour book, valuable for its stories but burdened by careless errors and muddy thinking.

Lebrecht does document what may be the saddest trend of all, the gradual replacement of knowledgeable people in music management and at recording companies with people who are essentially music tourists themselves. It's a sort of Gresham's law of talent, the crass and charismatic driving out the capable and considerate. As long as it makes money, it will continue. But that is an open question. Classical music's tourist economy, unmoored from the reality of the music itself, is having a harder and harder time finding anything it can package at a profit. As for the tourist listener, there is no reason why even a "classical" symphony by Paul McCartney should interest him if someone like Yanni or John Tesh will meet his need better.

In one sense music appreciation has in fact turned out to be a menace. The contraction that is going on in classical music—a contraction so severe that even the successes of the tourist trade cannot conceal it—is the inevitable legacy of a musical culture that grew large on casual attention. I like to think that eventually the contraction will stop, and what will be left will be the music, and those who want to play it and listen to it. Audiences will be smaller, concerts will be fewer, recordings will go out of print, and scores will cost their weight in gold. It will hardly be a paradise, but for a while, the locals may have the place to themselves again, and the only visitors will be the ones who like it the way it is.

[1] WHO KILLED CLASSICAL MUSIC?: Maestros, Managers and Corporate Politics, by *Norman Lebrecht.* Birch Lane Press/Carol Publishing Group. $24.95.

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ROBERT S. CLARK

Early Music in Boston

OF ALL AMERICA'S CITIES OUTSIDE NEW YORK, it is surely in Boston that the classical music tradition seems healthiest. Anyone's list of thriving institutions there would start with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, a staple of the "Big Five" American orchestras (with New York, Chicago, Cleveland, and Philadelphia). Founded in 1881, it is a first-rank ensemble with a worldwide reputation, a devoted local following, and plenty of money in the bank. Nearly half of its members serve on the faculty of the New England Conservatory of Music just down the street. Opened in 1867, the Conservatory is the oldest independent school of music in the country, and draws students from around the globe. Another legacy of the past that flourishes in the present is the Handel & Haydn Society, established in 1815 and now the country's oldest continuously performing arts organization. The accounting could go on and on, encompassing both professional and amateur groups: a recent concert program contained a list of thirty choruses and musical societies that belonged to the Greater Boston Choral Consortium (web site: www.bostonsings.org), a reminder, if one were needed, of the region's still strong links to the nineteenth-century practice of congregational musicmaking.

Scrutiny of the programs of Boston's musical venues shows that new music, not to mention the standard repertoire, is not neglected in them. But it is for its abundance of early music performances that the city has become a magnet. The biennial Boston Early Music Festival and Exhibition is admired as much for its garland of concurrent events, bringing together early music instrumentalists and instrument makers, dancers, recording producers and opera directors, and even specialists in the financial possibilities and pitfalls peculiar to early music practitioners, as for its sterling and scholarly musical presentations. Throughout each season, Boston's concert halls and churches resound with the music of the Renaissance, the Baroque, and the early Classical period.

Among the ensembles with a decided fondness for the Baroque are Boston Baroque and the Cantata Singers. Like the Handel & Haydn Society, the former, inaugurated as Banchetto Musicale in 1973 and calling itself the first permanent Baroque orchestra in North America, plays on period instruments or facsimiles. The Cantata Singers was formed in 1964 to rescue the bulk of J. S. Bach's church cantatas from undeserved obscurity, but has expanded its repertoire over the years to include works from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries.

Though it is a long way from a scientific sample, this observer heard

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two performances—by the Handel & Haydn Society (HHS) and by the Cantata Singers—last fall and can testify to their effectiveness. The first was HHS's reading of Handel's pastoral ode *L'Allegro, Il Penseroso ed Il Moderato* for soloists, chorus, and orchestra. This odd work of 1740 comes from the period when Handel was adapting his style to the altered tastes of his London audiences, away from the Italianate operas that had secured his early success and toward the outlook of the final years of his life that produced his great English-language oratorios. His setting of Dryden's *Alexander's Feast* had been a success in 1736, and that may have prompted the composer to turn to "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" by Milton, at that time England's most popular poet. Handel selected Charles Jennens to adapt the poems, and Jennens solicited help from another of Handel's friends, James Harris, whose idea it was to alternate verses of the two Humors, Mirth and Melancholy, throughout the piece. (Milton's Melancholy, it should be noted, is close to what we would now call contemplation.) Jennens added a set of fifty lines to the end of the Milton excerpts to unite the poems "in one Moral Design," and Handel himself got into the act by dubbing the concluding section "Il Moderato" and cutting some of the lines devoted to Melancholy to prevent "too much grave musick without intermission."

It is little wonder that this hybrid, a series of poetic asseverations of their respective virtues by three abstractions, comes off as somewhat tame and mechanical, in spite of the many felicities Handel's score contains. Perhaps sensing the static nature of the text, he refused to write an overture for it, instead insisting that one of his Op. 6 concerti grossi open each of the two initial sections. That tradition was observed on the evening at hand, with readings of Nos. 10 and 1 that were lively and full of contrast.

A page in the program was devoted to explaining that HHS embraces the notion of "historically informed performance (HIP)." "What HIP performances offer audiences is a chance to hear Baroque and Classical works using the same instrumentation that was available to the composer. In this way musical lines that disappear in larger, homogeneous ensembles become clearer and take on a more prominent part of the musical experience. The Handel & Haydn Society has presented HIP performances since 1986, when Christopher Hogwood assumed the position of Artistic Director. . . . Of the instruments themselves, several used in the orchestra were actually built in the Baroque or Classical periods; others are replicas designed with specific Baroque and Classical models in mind. . . . Audiences have the opportunity to hear the unique textures afforded by period instruments, as well as appropriate tempos and dynamics."

With Hogwood at the helm, and in the acoustically admirable but spacious Symphony Hall, what this meant in practice was an accomplished but soft-grained performance sonically more in tune with the melancholy sections than with the mirthful. The hall's size may have conspired in making the standout moments of the evening Part One's

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air "Sweet bird, that shun'st the noise of folly," sung with agility and grace by the soprano Lisa Saffer accompanied by the obbligato wooden flute of Christopher Krueger, and Part Three's duet "As steals the morn upon the night," with tenor Alan Bennett and Saffer. But the quick and the concertati passages were never less than effective. At both philosophical poles, the obbligato solo instrumental playing was outstanding. Hogwood's way with the chorus was impressive: balances were just and attacks and releases clean and precise. The fugal chorus that closes Part II, "These pleasures, Melancholy, give," ending in a long diminuendo, was memorable.

The Cantata Singers took their program of J. S. Bach and Heinrich Schütz to the New England Conservatory's Jordan Hall, one of the city's most prized concert locales. Bearing the name of one of the two merchant families that teamed up to create Jordan Marsh department stores, the unusual thousand-seat hall, opened in 1903, was modeled by its architect, Edmund Wheelwright, on the court theater-concert halls of Italy. Its steeply raked rows of seats form a horseshoe curve around the stage, making for an intimacy with the performing musicians that Symphony Hall does not provide. The vaulted and coffered ceiling serves, perhaps, to provide the irregular reflecting surfaces that many acousticians declare essential to proper ensemble blend. When the hall was opened, observers of all stripes declared it a fine place to hear music. In the words of one who was involved in an acoustical study of the hall in its inaugural year, "No part of the hall is outside the sphere of sympathy."

The Conservatory undertook what it called a restoration of Jordan Hall a couple of years ago, reopening it in October 1995. For acoustical advice it chose R. Lawrence Kirkegaard & Associates of Chicago, the firm responsible for the splendid Seiji Ozawa Concert Hall on the Tanglewood grounds. The printed material on the restoration provided this observer clearly implied that the acousticians decided to leave pretty much well enough alone. Still, Jordan Hall is not for everyone or everything: its decoration is fustian, and the seats will not please those addicted to creature comforts. Acoustically, too, the smaller ensembles of the Schütz motets for voices and instruments seemed more comfortable in the hall than the Bach cantatas, where the sound of the massed 44 voices of the Singers and the instrumental ensemble was sometimes overbearing.

The Cantata Singers offered its fortunate audience three quite different Bach cantatas: "*Freue dich, erlöste Schar*" (BWV 30), "*Ich glaube, lieber Herr, hilf meinem Unglauben*" (BWV 109), and "*Du Friedefürst, Herr Jesu Christ*" (BWV 116), all for soloists, chorus and orchestra. To this they added two of Schütz's affecting Symphoniae Sacrae III: "*Wo der Herr nicht das Haus bauet*" and "*Vater unser*" (the familiar Lord's Prayer). As a whole the evening was one of uncommonly intelligent and accomplished singing and playing. David Hoose, music director of the Singers since 1982, has fashioned a crack ensemble, nicely balanced and richly

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blended. It did not match the HHS chorus in sophistication, but that is a quality probably misapplied to much of this music in any case. Hoose and his forces summoned the extroversion required for the opening BWV 30, for the feast of John the Baptist, which began life as a secular cantata in praise of a minor feudal lord. The conductor showed skill at enlivening phrases and concerted passages, picking up the tempo slightly at repetitions, and using dynamic variations to underline structure. Nonetheless, it was a relatively subdued moment that proved the most riveting: the aria "*Kommt, ihr eingefochtnen Sünder*" ("Come, you sorely tried sinners"), for alto, flute, and strings. The extraordinary choral opening of BWV 109, on the text that comprises its title, was articulated well and propelled to a satisfying climax. There were perhaps too many choral voices for totally effective balance in the Schütz motets, but they were marked by musical aplomb, fluent and engaging playing by the skilled instrumentalists, and, in "*Wo der Herr,*" bewitching singing by two fine mezzo-sopranos, Majie Zeller and Lynn Torgove.

A few nights later, in the full glare of a first-class reading of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* by Kurt Masur and the New York Philharmonic, featuring the splendid, thrilling, and nuanced work of the Westminster Symphonic Choir, it was still possible to recall these Boston performances with pleasure. If the caliber of the city's musical life is always as high as what I witnessed, Bostonians have much to be grateful for.

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MARCIA B. SIEGEL

Urban Anthropology

TO MOST PEOPLE, THE WORD FESTIVAL suggests a sort of expanded block party that can combine ceremonial events with cultural forms of dance, music, and crafts. But large-scale arts festivals today are more likely to be invented occasions. This doesn't necessarily mean they're fake, only that they have different intentions; they may not be the best place to see local color.

The last big international dance festival I attended took place nearly ten years ago in Los Angeles, where a dozen Pacific Rim countries presented theatrical, ritual, and folk dances in a variety of spaces: parks, plazas, courtyards, theaters, museums, and outdoor arenas, with the public's participation invited as often as possible. Last summer's 12th International Festival of Dance Academies in Hong Kong, with performances originating in eleven countries and choreographers from Asia, Europe and the Americas, was neither as diverse nor as spontaneous, but both events had been fabricated by the festival sponsors.

The City of Los Angeles offered "authenticity," traditional performances as defined by the participating groups. At that time—it seems long ago now—critics were worrying about how to talk about this work, how to identify it, describe it, evaluate it. Had it changed from some paradigmatic essence conceived in the distant past and supposedly preserved intact for all time? How much change was allowable before the dance became a new creation? Did the unintentional shadings of prolonged use and word-of-mouth transmission diminish a work's traditional efficacy? Were modern interpolations in bad taste? Could a tribal work be credibly done on a proscenium stage? At what point did a planned performance cede its professional dignity to the disorderly enthusiasm of a participatory audience?

Even then, we realized that hard-line authenticity was probably unattainable in any culture. What was considered the most "classical" of the events at the LA Festival, a version of the Javanese court dance bedoyo, far from leading an unbroken existence for thousands of years, had been newly reconstructed by a living choreographer in Yogyakarta for the international touring events of 1990–91. Other groups offered pan-ethnic confections devised to represent recently independent nations; ritual or ritualistic performances adapted to foreign circumstances; and old dances with admittedly new elements. Not to mention on-the-spot instructional sessions, devotions, and farandoles for the audience.

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Virtually all the performances at the LA Festival, though, aimed at showing cultures as relatively unique and unpolluted by modern attitudes, or at least as withstanding worldwide popular culture. The audience realized that television and movies must have penetrated the most remote villages, but we believed that when natives practiced their dance and rituals, they left the jet-propelled world behind. That, in fact, leaving this world behind was necessary for them to be Indian at all, or Balinese or Micronesian.

In the Hong Kong of 1997, the message was that modern culture is a synthesis, and that culture is inescapably modern. People mainly live in cities, not villages, and they communicate by fax and cellphone, not tom-toms. Prominently on view at the Festival was a massive demonstration of modernism. This was performance tailored for a world market, dancers highly skilled in many techniques, and choreography produced with theatrical savvy.

The Hong Kong Festival was started in 1985 by Carl Wolz, then head of dance at the newly opened Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (APA). Wolz, a Juilliard-trained former José Limón dancer, established a solid program in Hong Kong on the Western conservatory model, with major concentrations in ballet, modern dance, and Chinese dance. APA's graduates are being prepared for professional careers in dancing, choreographing and teaching.

The festival brought together performing groups from four comparable institutions, National Institute of the Arts in Taipei, Beijing Dance Academy, London Contemporary Dance School, and Purchase (NY) Dance Corps, for featured performances in the largest of the APA's theaters. Smaller, less official groups and independent choreographers were showcased in studio and small-stage performances. These were "student" companies only in the broadest sense, encompassing officially sponsored university groups and national ensembles, experimental ventures comparable to New York's downtown dance companies, plus teachers performing solos, historical reconstructions, children's recitals, and performers from special-learning schools. A number of off-campus events by local and visiting groups filled in the few cracks in the week's schedule.

Since the beginning the Festival has also organized a research conference, and hosted meetings of various regional organizations now networked into the World Dance Alliance. After six years in Hong Kong, the Festival began a migration to other Asian cities, but Wolz had always intended for it to cycle back in the momentous year of the colony's return to China.

Much of the dance in Hong Kong in '97 looked a lot like what I might see on a mainstage in Boston or New York: tradition slickly packaged, youthful rebellion draped in pop commodities, and all-purpose, anonymous, plotless dancing for its own sake. When the lights went up on one of the week's 80 or 90 pieces, you were as likely to see a skyscraper

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city made of Coke cans as a bevy of maidens in brocaded pajamas doing multiple pirouettes while kicking the back of their heads. In the best works as well as some of the most mundane, tradition was very much an issue.

During a panel discussion I moderated one morning among four "hyphenated-Chinese" dancers (from Taiwan, Malaysia, the US, and Hong Kong), someone made the startling remark that choreography is a Western concept. To the Asian artist, dancing is a demonstration of skills. Dance-drama and rituals may absorb these skills into specific formats, but to shape dancing as an independent theatrical entity is a relatively undeveloped practice. I think this notion explained a lot of what looked to me like vast expanses of unmitigated virtuosity on the stage.

Beijing Dance Academy offered several of these dances-for-their-own-sake numbers. Sleeve and ribbon dances, with silken women gliding swiftly on their heels in pleasantly evolving floor-patterns, are an indispensable part of Chinese folkloric presentations. So are showy acrobatics and martial arts lifted from Chinese Opera. All these genres were easily folded into Beijing's concert repertory, modern arrangements of traditional skills that emphasized precision, uniformity, and visual design, and didn't demand anything of the choreographer beyond moving the groups around and setting steps in order.

There's a certain charm for audiences about these clockwork drill-displays, and it's not solely attributable to some lingering allure of chinoiserie. Americans have always adored marching bands, swimming and flying squads, and military parades. High school and college dance teams, the newest performative amalgam, are everywhere. Instead of swinging swords and fans, these groups punctuate their routines with pep yells, gymnastics, tumbling, acrobatics, and here and there a swift connecting ballet maneuver. ESPN announcers track the competitions with a play-by-play. For the public that appreciates dance spectacle, there isn't so very much difference between adolescent pep dancing and the sophisticated Celtic chorus lines of *Riverdance*.

In addition to its sensual pleasures, precision movement gives the audience a reflection of itself enhanced by a harmony that can never be achieved in real life. The Soviet ballets of the 1960s and 1970s abstracted and regularized the vocabulary of dance together with expressive gesture, to represent the collectivized soul of the masses. Though those ballets had stories, they were devoid of naturalism or even individual character. Instead, the ensemble charged and flew in virtuosic battalions. Discipline conquered. Solidarity made them strong. As a political symbol, this dance affected audiences like the rallies of the Third Reich.

If there's anything big going on in mainstream dance, I think it's the development of an International Style which gathers in all the physical accomplishments dancers have acquired at home and from the teachers roaming the world. Synchronized movement and uncomplicated rhythms provide a structural framework for these skills. High-tech media

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and marketing can both distribute the product and enrich its pool of raw materials. In these spectacular but thematically simplistic forms, dance is experiencing something similar to the boom in music that has produced Afro-pop, Canto-pop, fusion jazz, and other popular hybrids.

Beijing Dance Academy and the Guangdong Modern Dance Company (seen at the theater in Hong Kong City Hall) retain some of this conglomerate sensibility. They offer formalism and high-powered effects minus the political sledgehammer. Ballet has a firm foothold in Asia, established by the refugees from the Russian Revolution who fled eastward, leaving their trail across China and Japan. Modern dance in recent times has been exported on a big scale by the American Dance Festival to Guangdong and other worldwide ports. Chinese opera techniques and remnants of Soviet realism influence both Beijing and Guangdong dance, as well as the other institutions serviced by these training centers.

Beijing's use of traditional movements and their associated character types romanticizes ancient images of male and female that would be obsolete off the stage. Launched into the upper registers of technique they become contemporary models of success. Guangdong's mélange of styles, sophisticated lighting, and streamlined costumes link the performance to modernity while asserting a sanitized national identity. Its dances often allude to issues of gender, power, and community, but lack a strong choreographic point of view that would give the action a specific relevance. To a greater or lesser degree, much of what I saw in Hong Kong shared this aesthetic of diffuse modernism. The works that seemed more interesting and less formulaic looked at tradition as a ground of troubled histories, a source of personal conflict, and a pathway into movement experimentation.

Two strong but contrasting theatrical works demonstrated how traditional aesthetics are being reinterpreted. From Malaysia, Mew Chang Tsing and Lee Swee Keong's *Re: Lady White Snake* adapted a Chinese legend in terms of contemporary theatricality. Taiwanese choreographer Tao Fu-lann's *The Jars* created an atmosphere of reflective sensuality that fused techniques of postmodern movement exploration and Eastern meditation.

Mew Chang Tsing's RiverGrass Dance Company and the piece they showed in Hong Kong represent a wide spectrum of training. Mew herself, a graduate of the Hong Kong Academy, exemplifies the intercultural Asian artist, not only choreographing but writing and teaching with a consciously eclectic set of resources. In Mew and Lee's reinterpretation the white snake who takes the form of a woman has a double identity, Mew as the White Snake and Lee as the male Green Snake.

I don't know the original myth, but the dance seemed to draw on Jungian ideas about the divided psyche. Green and White Snake encountered a Scholar and a Monk, perhaps representing the intellec-

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tual and the spiritual sides of the male/female persona. After symbolic seductions and struggles, the four seemed to reach an understanding where they accepted each other on equal terms. The movement included gestures, steps and body postures from Balinese, Indian, Chinese and Western modern dance, but all the characters were allowed a more naturalistic basic stance than any of the antecedent forms. The Scholar, for instance, would beckon to the White Snake with codified gestures from Bharata Natyam, released both rhythmically and spatially from the prescribed formatting of the original context. White Snake would angle and sidestep like a Hindu temple dancer but smile flirtatiously, against the rules for the Thai, Burmese, Cambodian or Balinese dancers she was evoking. So the dance as a whole, with music that sounded like a New-Age movie score, looked moody and exotic rather than severely didactic as traditional forms often do to the modern audience. It didn't preach or instruct, but evoked themes known throughout time.

Tao Fu-lann has studied American modern dance forms and Chinese and Taiwanese performance. *The Jars*, choreographed in 1995, enjoyed a successful touring career; I had already seen it in New York before its showing at the Hong Kong Arts Center. Using the gorgeous and multivalent scenic device of large, translucent urns with lights and water inside them, Tao introduced a community of six women, each focussed on one jar but all sharing the same movement behavior. Slowly they rose and sank down behind the jars, tilted them to produce subtle changes in light and sound, curled around them like decorative bas-reliefs. Sometimes they climbed on the rims and squatted there, sometimes they scooped out water and scattered it with widespread arms.

Maintaining the strong visual image of the jars, the women's slowly evolving and cryptic movement invited the audience to make its own connections to Chinese culture and to the inner life of women. At one point, as they bent over and plunged headfirst into the jars, they implied mundane tasks like washing their hair, but the same action also hinted at a narcissistic fascination with what they saw in the water, or it might have signalled a ritual cleansing or anointing, even drowning. At the end of the long piece, the women formed pairs and, with their skirts draped around the jars, became four-armed, praying goddesses who reminded me of some ancient Chinese religious paintings.

Spirituality is never far from cultural forms in Asia, no matter how they seem to deal with contemporary secular life. In *Sun Flowers*, a powerful work by Guo Jun-ming for the Taipei National Institute of the Arts dancers, a group of women in street clothes stood to one side of the stage, interrupting a recording of Thomas Tallis' *Lamentations of Jeremiah* with loud yells and screams. One by one they placed flowers on a sort of altar suggesting some female ancestor-deity. The piece had opened with a circle of men and women singing and stamping in an adaptation of a Taiwanese aboriginal dance. I had first thought that this piece referred simply to the loss of a traditional culture, but later I was told it was a cry

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against the contemporary practice of selling aboriginal girls into prostitution.

For several years the Taiwanese have been rediscovering the history of their island and the tribes who inhabited it before the influx of Chinese from the mainland in the twentieth century. Aboriginal music and dances have been researched and restaged for folk dance companies and student ensembles at NIA. Studying and celebrating these old cultures is a way of reinforcing the sense of an independent nation on Formosa, and of partially atoning for injustices done to them in the past. Last summer I visited a series of restored aboriginal villages built around the perimeter of a Disney-type amusement park. The student adaptations of the aboriginal dances in Hong Kong struck me as more persuasive than the show put on for the tourists by a group of aboriginal performers.

What it means to be Chinese, or hyphenated Chinese, is a preoccupation of many contemporary artists. In the year of the Hong Kong changeover, these questions became more troubling than ever. Hong Kong seemed to be accommodating to its reunification with the mainland. Whatever new problems may be in store, people seemed relieved to see the conversion from British rule finally accomplished. But Taiwan's independence seemed more tenuous than ever, as the Chinese intensified their pressure for its return. Most Taiwanese I met last summer seemed determined to assert the island's autonomy, to distinguish Taiwan from China, not only by its booming economy but its food, its cultural history, its emerging dance style.

Set alongside these political tensions there was the multiculturalist and universalist instinct to communicate across contested and shifting national boundaries. The American choreographer Rosalind Newman, based for several years now on the faculty at the Hong Kong Academy, showed *Scenes from a Mirage*, in which mysterious figures appeared from the shadows deep at the back of the stage to dance with a contemporary young woman, then receded once again into a doorway that might have represented the past. Although the music was Yiddish-flavored (by Guy Klucevsek, the Klezmatics, and Muzikas), and the dance could have taken place at a Jewish wedding, Newman and the large cast of Chinese students managed at the same time to suggest memories of a Chinese family.

Contributing to the nonsectarian look of a lot of dance is the widespread influence of German Tanztheater. The theater-games techniques and quasi-therapeutic gambits of Pina Bausch and her followers have infiltrated as far as Beijing and Jakarta, providing a vehicle for contemporary conflict that needn't be restrained by traditional rules. Tanztheater's movement is built on what people do every day, not on any rigid studio conventions. I think its bone-deep physicality allows performers to express themselves in any cultural context, but it also can supplant other dance idioms. The clash between the "real" and the

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invented movement of a dance form often becomes the subject of choreography.

In one corner of a large gallery during a loud, continuous, 1960s-type people-dance event by the Hong Kong performance collective Zuni Icosahedron, I noticed a sort of corral or cage about twenty feet square. The structure was laced around and around with strips of white cloth, almost completely curtained. Months later I saw a film of a Chinese funeral, where the coffin was carried through the streets inside just such a structure. In Hong Kong, peeping through the slits in the cloth, I saw a man slowly circling a platform with the wide, low, pivoting steps of Chinese martial arts. As he went, he dropped brocade ribbons on the floor. After a long time, he mounted the platform, where a garment was hanging on a coat rack. The man slowly spread out the garment to reveal a splendid robe that might be worn by an emperor in a Beijing Opera performance. I could hear voices drifting in and out that might have come from the opera. The man put his arms into the sleeves of the costume. He seemed to be embracing it, merging with it, making love to it. He started pulling white strips of cloth from inside the costume, disemboweling it. He got out of the costume, circled the platform again, and finally left the enclosure.

The man was the choreographer, Yeung Chi Kuk, an accomplished Beijing Opera actor who had recorded his own sound track. For me, this performance piece about loving and letting go of tradition, about being and not being Chinese, was the most moving event of the entire week. The title was written in Chinese in the program, and when I asked, someone translated it as *No matter, it's 1997, we're still dancing.*

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Classic Chandler

DREISER, CATHER, WHARTON, DOS PASSOS, FAULKNER, Steinbeck, Nabokov, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Flannery O'Connor, most recently Nathanael West: the list of twentieth-century American fictionists whose work has been published in The Library of America is unsurprising. It is rather more surprising that two volumes in the Library should be devoted to the work of Raymond Chandler; this surprise that Chandler got into the club so soon or at all (obviously the absence of Hemingway and Fitzgerald involves rights to reprint) has everything to do with the fact that he is the first writer of thrillers, the first "mystery" novelist to be selected. But there are further indications that Chandler's reputation has never stood higher than at present: a biography by an English journalist, Tom Hiney, and a reissue of a 1962 collection of letters and essays testify to interest in him on more than one front. Nor is the interest of an antiquarian sort: the assumption behind these books is that there are people out there who still want to read about—even to read—Chandler.[1]

Tom Hiney's biography is well-written, sensible, sympathetic to Chandler and his work, though it doesn't justify itself as an improvement on the pioneering Chandlerian, Frank MacShane's biography of two decades back (MacShane also edited Chandler's letters). The main events of the life are capably rehearsed: Chandler's birth in Chicago in 1888; his move to England with his mother, after she and his alcoholic father separated; schooling at Dulwich College in London; brief identity as an impressionistic young poet and prose writer who published in English magazines; return to the United States and service in the Canadian Expeditionary Forces during World War I; life in Southern California, the death of his mother, and his marriage soon thereafter to Cecile "Cissy" Pascal, already twice-married and significantly older than her new husband. In the 1920s Chandler worked as an auditor for an oil company, with some success; he had affairs with other women, none of them serious or prolonged. His eventual firing in 1932 on grounds of absenteeism and alcoholism precipitated his decision to become a writer, indeed the kind of thriller writer who didn't yet exist (not even

[1] RAYMOND CHANDLER: Volume 1, Stories & Early Novels; Volume 2, Later Novels & Other Writings, ed. by *Frank MacShane*. The Library of America. $35.00 each. RAYMOND CHANDLER: A Biography, by *Tom Hiney*. Atlantic Monthly Press. $26.00. RAYMOND CHANDLER SPEAKING, ed. by Dorothy Gardiner and Sorley Walker. University of California Press. $12.95p.

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Dashiell Hammett, whose career was winding down). He published a number of "pulp" fictions in the crime magazine *Black Mask*, later cannibalizing them in his novels. At age fifty, his first novel, *The Big Sleep*, was brought out by Knopf, followed by *Farewell, My Lovely* a year later. Although these novels were successes *d'estime*, their good reviews didn't make them big sellers, and it wasn't until 1943, Hiney points out, when his fourth novel *The Lady in the Lake* appeared, that his career took off. It did so not because of that novel but because, a few weeks previously, Knopf had sold the paperback rights of *The Big Sleep* to Avon. The twenty-five-cent edition sold 300,000 copies, with a further 150,000 in a special armed services edition. Four months later Knopf gave Pocket Books the rights to *Farewell, My Lovely*: result, one million copies sold. Chandler had arrived.

There followed, in the 1940s, his fling with Hollywood, a relatively productive one compared to those of some writers who tried it. His collaboration with Billy Wilder on the screenplay for James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity* almost insured the superb movie that resulted (more than helped along by Fred MacMurray, Barbara Stanwyck and Edward G. Robinson). Although he also worked on less distinguished products, such as *And Now Tomorrow* and *The Unseen* (unseen by me since my thirteenth year), and though the final version of *Strangers on a Train*, in which he collaborated with Hitchcock, didn't satisfy him ("no guts . . . no characters, no dialogue"), he made a substantial amount of money—$40,000 for eight weeks' work on *Strangers*. At that point the total earnings from American royalties on his novels—of which only 68,000 of the three and a half million copies sold had been in hardback—totaled $56,000.

Perhaps even more important in adding luster to the Chandler image were the movies Hollywood made, with varying amounts of fidelity and artistic success, from his own novels. In 1944 Edward Dmytryk directed *Murder, My Sweet* (title changed from *Farewell, My Lovely*) with an unthreatening but wholly agreeable Dick Powell as Philip Marlowe, a lot of good Californian interiors, and much fog, exterior and inside Marlowe's drugged and battered head.[2] *The Big Sleep* followed in 1946, with Bogart as the detective, following up on his performance as Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*. The "sexy" antics added to the production, between Bogart and his real-life sweetheart Lauren Bacall, aren't much fun (was Lauren Bacall ever much fun?), but the pacing is admirable and there is Elisha Cook, Jr.'s memorable portrait of the doomed little man, Harry Jones. Neither *The Brasher Doubloon* (*The High Window*), with improbable George Montgomery as Marlowe, nor *The Lady in The Lake*, also made in 1947, with the also improbable Robert Montgomery and

[2] *Murder, My Sweet* was nominated for an Academy Award in 1944 but lost out because of censorship fears to *Going My Way*, with Bing Crosby and Barry Fitzgerald as those loveable Irish priests. Commented Chandler, "My belief is Hollywood will never find itself until it has the guts to tell the Catholics to go to hell."

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the famous (boring) "camera-eye" technique, added anything worth seeing of note to Chandler on film.

My introduction to Chandler, whose name at the time I barely associated with them, was effected through the movies of his first two books, and it wasn't until a decade later that, as a graduate student, I read the novels—partly by way of demonstrating I was no dryasdust Eng lit pedant. For the first time I experienced Chandler's style, the way he liked to put sentences together into a paragraph. When early in the film of *The Big Sleep,* Marlowe heads for Geiger's bookshop on the pretext of locating some rare book, we see Bogart in a splendid trench coat striding through the pouring L.A. rain. But the prose that opens chapter six of the novel shows something else, something more:

> Rain filled the gutters and splashed knee-high off the sidewalk. Big cops in slickers that shone like gun barrels had a lot of fun carrying giggling girls across the bad places. The rain drummed hard on the roof of the car and the burbank top began to leak. A pool of water formed on the floorboards for me to keep my feet in. It was too early in the fall for that kind of rain. I struggled into a trench coat and made a dash for the nearest drugstore and bought myself a pint of whiskey. Back in the car I used enough of it to keep warm and interested. I was long overparked, but the cops were too busy carrying girls and blowing whistles to bother about that.

The writer is having a good time, even as his hero's situation ranges from uncomfortable to "warm and interested." Those "big cops" turn into Mack Sennett figures of fun; the leaky car whose roof with its "burbank top" (a nostalgia item?) is there by way of hatching the mildly sardonic reference to the convenient water buildup, "for me to keep my feet in." An unobvious way to talk about what whiskey does for you—keeps you warm and interested—and the final friendly return to the cops, still doing their thing, add up to a paragraph that is, first and last, highly entertaining. (An earlier version of the paragraph occurs in Chandler's pulp story, "Killer in the Rain.")

Here and elsewhere Marlowe is the beneficiary of Chandler's genial performing skills, in a way that distinguishes him from Hammett's private eye in *The Dain Curse,* who notes from his car window that "Rain and darkness shut out the scenery . . . It was a rotten ride, wet, noisy, and bumpy. It ended in as dark, wet, and muddy a spot as any we had gone through." Hammett strings sentences together with a minimum of tone and reflexive commentary; so when in *The Maltese Falcon* Sam Spade returns home after finding his partner, Archer, murdered, he reaches for a tall bottle of Bacardi, "poured a drink and drank it standing. He put bottle and glass on the table, sat on the side of the bed facing them, and rolled a cigarette. He had drunk his third glass of Bacardi and was lighting his fifth cigarette when . . ." Just the facts, please: if Spade feels any more "warm and interested" than before he got out the Bacardi, we

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won't know about it. Hammett is dedicated to keeping things extremely cool indeed; Chandler, by contrast, humorously warms them up.

More than once, in his letters and prose statements that make modest attempts at theoretical claims, Chandler let it be known that for him the beginning—and maybe the end—of writing fiction was verbal play: "All I wanted when I began was to play with a fascinating new language, and trying, without anybody noticing it, to see what it would do as a means of expression which might remain on the level of unintellectual thinking and yet acquire the power to say things which are usually only said with a literary air." Hemingway had done this and, starting out in the thirties to write his own sentences, Chandler owed an immense debt to him. Although he spent energy scoffing at modernist critics who "fawned" on T.S. Eliot, he would have liked Eliot's insistence, apropos of *The Waste Land*, that it was in the main "a piece of rhythmical grumbling." That definition would have seemed truer to Chandler than saying the poem was about the decline of Western civilization. He insisted that Marlowe, and by implication he himself, had no "social conscience," although he had "a personal conscience, which is an entirely different matter."

He took every opportunity in his correspondence to disabuse people of the notion that subject matter was central to his fictional operation. He once invited Charles Morton, an editor at the *Atlantic*, to whom some of Chandler's liveliest letters were posted, to commission a piece titled "The Insignificance of Significance," "in which I will demonstrate in my usual whorehouse style that it doesn't matter a damn what a novel is about, that the only fiction of any moment in any age is that which does magic with words . . . and that the only writers left who have anything to say are those who write about practically nothing and monkey around with odd ways of doing it." This sense of belatedness and the aggressiveness here and elsewhere conceal, not too subtly, an uneasiness on Chandler's part about the subject matter—detectives, crooks, cops, graft, sleaze, Los Angeles—he had stuck himself with. After all, he was a man who had been given the benefit, at Dulwich College, of what he more than once refers to as "a classical education" and who had written some "sensitive" if not very convincing poems. He wanted to be praised by "highbrows," even as he was contemptuous of them: that Edmund Wilson, in his dismissal of the detective novel ("Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?") singled out Chandler as an exception to the form's triviality, only provoked in reply the following shot: "The problem of what is significant literature I leave to fat bores like Edmund Wilson—a man of many distinctions—among which personally I revered most highly . . . that of having made fornication as dull as a railroad time table." (He is referring, not without justice, to Wilson's *Memoirs of Hecate County*.)

Chandler is engaging as a writer partly because he was so open about his aim to write about "practically nothing" but "monkey around with odd ways of doing it." What is there to say about a practically anonymous

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office building in L.A. called the Fulwider Building? Quite a bit when you monkey around with it:

> A single drop light burned far back, beyond an open, once gilt elevator. There was a tarnished and well-missed spittoon on a gnawed rubber mat. A case of false teeth hung on the mustard colored wall like a fuse box in a screen porch . . .. Painless dentists, shyster detective agencies, small sick businesses that had crawled there to die . . . A nasty building.
>
> (*The Big Sleep*)

And here is Marlowe on a nasty section of L.A. he calls Bunker Hill:

> Bunker Hill is old town, lost town, shabby town, crook town. Once, very long ago, it was the choice residential district of the city, and there are still standing a few of the jigsaw Gothic mansions . . . They are all rooming houses now, their parquetry floors are scratched and worn through the once glossy finish and the wide sweeping staircases are dark with time and with cheap varnish laid on over generations of dirt. In the tall rooms haggard landladies bicker with shifty tenants. On the wide cool front porches, reaching their cracked shoes into the sun, and staring at nothing, sit the old men with faces like lost battles.
>
> (*The High Window*)

The writing makes decay, the down and out, into something fresh.

Chandler liked to drop loud hints about qualities in his work that he was afraid critics and readers would overlook: "Why is it that the Americans—of all people the quickest to reverse their moods—do not see the strong element of burlesque in my kind of writing? Or is it just the intellectuals who miss that?" When in *The Little Sister*, Marlowe says "Yes" to something the sister, Orfamay Quest, has asked him, he says it "in a voice that sounded like Orson Welles with his mouth full of crackers." It's hard to miss that, as it is to ignore the element of farce or burlesque in a "violent" moment when Marlowe is struggling, in *The Big Sleep*, with Carmen Sternwood, Joe Brody and Brody's girl friend "Blonde Agnes":

> The blonde spat at me and threw herself on my leg and tried to bite that. I cracked her on the head with the gun, not very hard, and tried to stand up. She rolled down my legs and wrapped her arms around them. I fell back on the davenport.

That echt-thirties object, the davenport, which shows up in all the novels, is perfect for the Keystone Kops routine at the end of which Marlowe finds himself laughing unaccountably. (No doubt he's amused by Chandler's writing.) Everyone has his favorite Marlowe trope, many

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of them dutifully racist ("Cute as a Filipino on Saturday night") or fetched from far, as in the rainy night where "you can grow a beard waiting for a taxi." At times the comparison is deliberately over the line, even to the diminishing of sinister moments, as when in *The Big Sleep* Marlowe listens outside the office to the killer, Lash Canino (well played in the movie by one Bob Steele), speaking to his about-to-be victim, Harry Jones: "The purring voice was now as false as an usherette's eyelashes and as slippery as a watermelon seed." Surely this goes too far, and surely that's the point: the element of burlesque, even in grim scenes, can't help asserting itself.

Rereading Chandler, I came across things I'd somehow missed previously, but that stood out when the novels' affinity with burlesque is stressed. For example, I wonder how many readers of *Farewell, My Lovely* remember that, when Marlowe is summoned for a chat with the sinister Jules Amthor, leading to his doped-up incarceration in Dr. Sonderborg's "rest home," he is taken to Amthor by an Indian of memorable proportions. Chapter 20 begins succinctly: "The Indian smelled," and goes on to detail the extent of that smell and the panache of the Indian's sartorial habit: "A tie dangled outside his buttoned jacket, a black tie which had been tied with a pair of pliers in a knot the size of a pea." Almost immediately Marlowe and the Indian get into a verbal tussle, as the latter orders him to "Come quick, come now":

> "Come where?" I said.
> "Huh, Me Second Planting. Me Hollywood Indian."
> "Have a chair, Mr. Planting,"
> He snorted and his nostrils got very wide. They had been wide enough for mouseholes to start with.
> "Name Second Planting. Name no Mister Planting."
> "What can I do for you?"

After Second Planting replies in a "sonorous boom" with "Indian" talk—"Great white father say come quick"—Marlowe tells him to cut out the pig Latin, to which he replies, eloquently, "Nuts," and Marlowe adds, "We sneered at each other across the desk for a moment. He sneered better than I did."

None of this, of course, is necessary in any terms of plot, character, theme, but is there purely for itself. This is no Native American but a true Hollywood Indian, just as Alex Morny and his bodyguard Eddie Prue, in *The High Window*, are out of central casting: "All these boys have been to picture shows and know how night club bosses are supposed to act." In fact Alex Morny's nightclub looks exactly like a Hollywood stage set with "The cop on the gate, the shine on the door, the cigarette and check girls, the fat greasy sensual Jew with the tall stately bored showgirl, the well-dressed, drunk and horribly rude director cursing the barman . . ."—and so on. In circumstances like these, as framed by Marlowe/Chandler's witty imagination, the air can't really get too sinister.

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It's been the habit to condescend to Dick Powell's Marlowe in comparison with Bogart's, but in fact Powell, who seems to be having a fine time in the role (and isn't distracted by high jinx with Bacall) is true to much of the comedy in Chandler's work.

Although the selection of prose, *Raymond Chandler Speaking*, contains a number of his letters, it is far from a substitute for Frank MacShane's generous selection. Time and again I found myself assenting to Chandler's literary judgments, such as that Graham Greene lacked a sense of humor: "I am reading *The Heart of the Matter*, a chapter at a time. It has everything in it that makes literature except verve, wit, gusto, music and magic; a cool and elegant set-piece, embalmed by Whispering Glades." He contrasts it with the "life" felt in even the worst chapters of Dickens or Thackeray. He draws a bead on Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*, where she "is falling into the sad error of thinking that the involution of the language necessarily conceals a subtlety of thought. It doesn't; it conceals a vacuum"—precisely my response to that cobwebby novel. He admired the not-enough-admired these days Somerset Maugham, as the "complete professional," and thought Maugham's *Ashenden* was "far ahead of any spy story ever written." In the same letter he provided a list of some of his favorite "classic" books, a list interesting for its not-so-predictable character: "*Carmen* as Mérimée wrote it, *Herodias, Un Coeur Simple, The Captain's Doll, The Spoils of Poynton, Madame Bovary, The Wings of the Dove* . . . these are all perfect." His incisive remarks on somewhat forgotten novelists like James Gould Cozzens and John Marquand show that he had a taste for more than "classic" books; and his singling out of especially good novels by aspiring crime writers—like Julian Symons' *The 31st of February*—showed a caring eye and ear.

Chandler's last years, after his beloved Cissie died in 1954, make for sad reading. *The Long Goodbye*, his longest and most full-of-feeling novel, was published in 1952, after which he wrote almost nothing except the final, short, *Playback*. He spent a lot of time in London, cared for by what he called "a shuttle service" of five or more women of whom Natasha Spender was chief. The trouble was, as Tom Hiney remarks, that he tended to fall in love with them (not all at once) and such motives set awkwardly with the periodic depressions and excessive drinking marking these years. (Soon after Cissie's death he attempted an alcoholic suicide, but, probably on purpose, botched it.) But as far as I know he never wavered in his belief that it was a great thing to be a writer, and he didn't understand when another novelist complained about how painful the actual writing was. To his English publisher, Hamish Hamilton, he declared, "A writer who hates the actual writing is as impossible as a lawyer who hates the law or a doctor who hates medicine . . . The actual writing is what you live for . . . How can you hate the magic which makes a paragraph or a sentence or a line of dialogue or a description something in the nature of a new creation?" The sentiment has never been more convincingly expressed.

It may be less than essential to discriminate among and rank the

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novels. Chandler thought when he was writing *The Little Sister* that *Farewell, My Lovely* was probably his best book, but he could also see ways in which the unfinished *Little Sister* was superior. There are those who promote *The Long Goodbye* to the top of the list; and I find the lake scenes in the San Bernardino hills in *The Lady in the Lake* especially appealing (they were wholly omitted from the turgid 1947 film). The early "pulp" stories seem to me of interest mainly to the Chandler scholar; but essays like "The Simple Art of Murder," "Writers in Hollywood," and "Notes on the Mystery Story"—all contained in the Library Volume 2—are invaluable, sophisticated reflections on the art of the detective story and his own art. The screenplay he did with Wilder for the excellent *Double Indemnity* (also in Volume 2) is a thing of beauty.

The aforementioned Julian Symons, who more than once wrote appreciatively about Chandler, nevertheless in his survey of thriller writing, *Bloody Murder*, places him firmly below Hammett as an artist. Hammett was tougher, says Symons, and Chandler, in trying to create—in his Marlowe—"a man of honour" (Chandler's words) fell into softness and idealization and made up a detective the likes of which were never met on sea or land. Maybe so, but think of the things Chandler's books contain—atmosphere, humor, leisurely exploration of surface, farcical bits like the Indian—that Hammett's mainly lack. My own preference is unequivocally for Chandler, recognizing the ingenuity and hard work—and genius—he put into his literary career. He wrote: "What greater prestige can a man like me (not too greatly gifted, but very understanding) have than to have taken a cheap, shoddy, and utterly lost kind of writing, and have made of it something that intellectuals claw each other about?" We are moved to reply, what indeed?

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THOMAS M. DISCH

Double Talk, Double Dutch, Dutch Chocolate

EVEN THE EDITORS OF *POSTMODERN AMERICAN FICTION*[1] concede that as a principle of selection or classification "postmodern" is so nebulous as to be virtually without meaning except insofar as it signifies "fairly recent." It can also mean "our gang" but the gang in question can include almost anyone. The editors would have it that, "To a major writer and critic such as John Barth, postmodern American fiction is best represented by a well-established group of formally experimental authors who gained recognition in the 1960s: Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Richard Brautigan, Grace Paley, Donald Barthelme, and Robert Coover most prominent among them." If Barth himself cast his net so wide to recruit members of this "well-established group," then his judgement is truly prescient of the era to come, in which "diversity" would become the last common ground. In any case, those six names do appear on PAF's contents page, and probably represent an editorial consensus as to some irreducible postmodern minimum. Even so, Grace Paley would seem the odd woman out (or, here, in), since her stories are not notably experimental, even in their candid self-referentiality, which is rarely tricky in the manner of Barth or Philip Roth, but simply Grace-ful in an old-fashioned, tales-from-my-life way.

"Formally experimental" can serve as a qualification for postmodern status only if one forgets all the ways in which the modernists (not to mention the ancients) have anticipated most postmodern innovations, as represented in PAF. The popular cartoonists Lynda Barry and Art Spiegelman are represented here, but with work that is *less* innovative than George Herriman's "Krazy Kat" strips of the 1920s. There is a cartoon version of Paul Auster's *City of Glass* by Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli that isn't a cut above the Classic Comic version of *Toilers of the Sea*, in a technical sense. As to inherent narrative interest, I'd have to give the palm to Victor Hugo. Other contributors to PAF offer innovations that pale by comparison to modernist works by Kafka, Woolf, Gide, Cendrars, Gertrude Stein, and, indeed, hundreds of others now known chiefly to modernist antiquarians—as, doubtless, most of PAF's will be known in due course chiefly to postmodernist antiquarians.

[1] POSTMODERN AMERICAN FICTION: A Norton Anthology, ed. by *Paula Geyh, Fred G. Leebron,* and *Andrew Levy.* Norton. $24.95p.

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For if the postmodern pigeonhole is a shuck, so is the modernist pigeonhole. James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Thomas Mann, William Faulkner, and all the rest of the modernist Pantheon have as little in common as the politicans of the same era: i.e., celebrity and contemporaneity. Good artists are remarkable rather for their individuality and/or universality than for their adherence to a set of specs drawn up after the fact. The specs are drawn up for the use of epigones and camp followers, and that is surely the case here. The elder presences in PAF are writers of distinction and wide popularity, such as Thomas Pynchon, William Burroughs, Kurt Vonnegut, Ntozake Shange, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Toni Morrison, Joseph Heller, and Don DeLillo—all represented by excerpts from such well-known full-length works as *In Cold Blood, The Armies of the Night, Breakfast of Champions, Beloved,* and *White Noise.* (So, to anyone whose bookcase is already stocked with those writers, caveat emptor.)

The younger contributors, by contrast, offer fictions of often exiguous brevity that seem to have been written with the official Chicago Manual of Postmodern Poststyle before them. Thus, an extract from J. Yellowlees Douglas' hypertext screed offers an impressive, if illegible reproduction of a flowchart, and then two pages of the fustian being diagrammed. A sample:

When he looks at Jake

he realizes the utter impossibility of his ever having the words to tell him this.

He has no inkling of what they would even sound like.

Yet he knows

that the only person in the world who is going to break the news to Jake is sitting in his chair.

Last night, in the parking lot, a guy with a shitty Saturday Night Special had jumped him. When he found Luke didn't have a shred of fucking paper on him—nothing, nada—he was so disgusted he didn't even try to pistol-whip him. Now, looking at Jake's lips curling up around the tube in an attempt at a smile, he wishes the guy had fucking bashed his skull to kingdom come. Given him retrograde amnesia. Tossed the coroner another stiff for the fridge . . .

Readers anxious to catch more of Ms. Douglas' act can find it at the Norton website: http://www.wwnorton.com. I would submit that the same half-baked hard-boiled piffle, offered as a book, would find no takers and that it is only within the protective confines of the postmod-

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ern label that such stuff could see its way to print. But is Douglas ever a member of the club and proud possessor of the official encoding ring! Her attached resumé informs us the author, born in 1962, was "Formerly director of the Program in Professional Writing at Lehman College, the City University of New York . . . Douglas is now director of the Center for Written and Oral Communication at the University of Florida, where she is also assistant professor of English. Her critical work on hypertext has appeared in journals and collections in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, focusing on the applicability of literary theory, narratology, and esthetics to hypertext environments."

That is typical in its institutional bona fides of the resumés of the younger contributors to PAF, as the excerpt from "I Have Said Nothing" is typical in its choppiness and effortless inexpressivity of its style. When PAF's younger contributors are not writing botched genre, they favor lame stand-up comedy, as in this intro by performance artist Laurie Anderson (born 1947):

> Good evening. Now I'm no mathematician but I'd like to talk about just a couple of numbers that have really been bothering me lately, and they are zero and one. Now first, let's take a look at zero. Now nobody wants to be a zero. To be a zero means to be a nothing, a nobody, a has-been, a zilch.
>
> On the other hand, just about everybody wants to be number one. To be number one means to be a winner, top of the heap, the acme . . .

To heighten the hilarity, Anderson accompanies the script of "Talk-show" (which is a section of "Stories from the Nerve Bible," which is taken from her book of 1986, *Lower Mathematics*) with a picture of herself on stage in a white suit and mask.

Want more? Here's some schtick from Mark Leyner (born 1956), who prefaces this excerpt from *Tooth Imprints from a Corn Dog* (1995) with a statement of intent: "My work isn't animated by a desire to be experimental or post-modernist or aestheically subversive or even 'innovative'—it is animated by a desire to craft a kind of writing that is at every single moment exhilarating for the reader, where each phrase, each sentence is an event." Like this:

> I have programmed the television in my bedroom to awaken me, and at six o'clock I'm roused by CNN. I mute the news and telephone room service for a sweetbreads burrito and a thermos of black coffee.
>
> Several lines of verse have emerged intact from my hypnopompic state, and I scrawl them on a pad before they can evaporate:

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In a drawing room at Armani Kids,
I found the dead body of a policewoman.
I sucked her toe and she came to life.

There are also two fragments. The neo-Keatsian

Beads of mercury bubble from
the mouths of hemorrhaging androids . . .

and the evocative

Tooth imprints on a corn dog.

After momentarily considering revising the initial lines to read: "At a counterfeit hair-care products lab, / I found the dead body of a policewoman. / I sucked her toe and she came to life," and then not (there's something so much more febrile and chthonic about discovering this sleeping-beauty-in-blue at a juvenile couturier), I decided against incorporating any of this material into the poem. . . .

These samplings are sophomoric not only in their humor (big words are thought to be innately funny; likewise, body fluids, brand names, and unfamiliar food) but in their a priori hostility towards all forms of life other than sophomores. The message of postmodernism (as of Dada, back when) is that the Past is an oppressive burden that is best dealt with by inept parody that will show how *dumb* the past was. Thus, Duchamps's urinal; thus, Douglas' *faux noir.* Such barings of the artistic bum have become rituals of the avant-garde by this point: Yoko Ono made a movie featuring nothing but celebrity asses. PAF is often the prose equivalent.

"Postmodern" may also be the literary equivalent for that favorite euphemism of the politically correct, "diversity." Those parts of the introduction in which the editors explain why writers who are women, gays, lesbians, African-Americans, or other hyphenates are postmodern in their very nature are classic persiflage and worth close study by anyone intending a career in academia. It all boils down to why the once marginalized Other should become the canonical Author, as she has in PAF. Admittedly, of the 59 authors of fiction, a preponderance are still male (35 men, 24 women), but of *those* 24 women, 2 are Asian-American, 3 African-American, 3 Hispanic-American, and 2 Native American. (There are, additionally, 4 males in these categories.) This would suggest that women writers of color might be sympathetically disposed toward postmodernism as an arena of equal opportunities, but bell hooks (born 1955) in her essay "Postmodern Blackness," included in PAF's critical appendix, expresses mainly her sense of grievance and exclusion:

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> The failure to recognize a critical black presence in the culture and in most scholarship and writing on postmodernism compels a black reader, particularly a black female reader, to interrogate her interest in a subject where those who discuss and write about it seem not to know black women exist or even to consider the possibility that we might be somewhere writing or saying something that should be listened to, or producing art that should be seen, heard, approached with intellectual seriousness. . . .
>
> . . . Music is the cultural product created by African-Americans that has most attracted postmodern theorists. It is rarely acknowledged that there is far greater censorship and restriction of other forms of cultural production by black folks—literary, critical writing, etc. Attempts on the part of editors and publishing houses to control and manipulate the representation of black culture, as well as the desire to promote the creation of products that will attract the widest audience, limit in a crippling and stifling way the kind of work many black folks feel we can do and still receive recognition. Using myself as an example, that creative writing I do which I consider to be most reflective of a postmodern oppositional sensibility, work that is abstract, fragmented, non-linear narrative, is constantly rejected by editors and publishers. It does not conform to the type of writing they think black women should be doing or the type of writing they believe will sell. . . .

I daresay that bell hooks speaks in this essay not only for many African-American women writers, but for virtually *all* writers who have been discriminated against by editors and publishing houses solely on the basis of whether someone might want to read their work. Innumerable times I have been crippled and stifled myself in the same way as bell hooks, and I agree with her that "postmodern thinkers and philosophers [should] constitute themselves as an audience for such work" and "open up the field so that it will be more inclusive. . . ." It seems a pity in the light of such advocacy that the editors could not have opened up their own pages to offer us a sampling from one of hooks's abstract, fragmented, nonlinear narratives. Her nonfiction whets my appetite for more.

My estimate of the amount of material included in *Postmodern American Fiction solely* to meet affirmative action quotas would be 11 out of 57 pieces. As many more stories by writers of distinction or at least with name recognition value might be present for diversity's sake as much as for merit, and as many more again are by writers with solid postmodern credentials, such as William Vollmann, Susan Daith, and the nine other PAF contributors whose work is also to be found in *After Yesterday's Crash: The Avant-Pop Anthology* edited by Larry McCaffery (Penguin, 1995).

The practical consequence of using an anthology as a means of achieving gender and racial "balance" may well be the opposite of what

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its editors intended, for the dead and elderly white males who make the cut are generally not editorial "discoveries" but recognizable brand names whose presence will enhance the book's general sales prospects: Pynchon, Burroughs, Barthelme, et al., and whose blatant talent tends to overshadow those who made the cut by virtue of the quota system. And there is no middle ground between them, for the white male mediocrities who might have counterbalanced mediocrities of diversity *don't* make the cut. The result is a seeming gulf between Menu A and Menu B, visible to all and never to be mentioned aloud.

This gulf can absorb any amount of criticism, since the disparity between the two menus—between that is, the books people actually have enjoyed reading and those they *should* have enjoyed reading but don't or won't or haven't heard of—is the kind of esthetic scandal that is grist for the critical mill.

Critics are happiest with texts that allow them to display their full tool kit, texts that are either dense, opaque, or occluded and so can only be traversed with a guide's assistance, or else seem stupefyingly simple, like Warhol's movie of the Empire State Building. As yet, there is little published fiction of the latter, minimalist tendency. Is this only because of the efforts of editors and publishers, noted by bell hooks, to "promote the creation of products that will attract the widest audience"? She generously allows as how she is not "the only black person engaged in forms of cultural production, especially experimental ones, who is constrained by a lack of an audience for such work." One could go further and say she is not the only person of whatever race, sex, or gender preference to feel such constraints, and that almost everyone already in the postmodern club she is anxious to join shares her frustration with editors, publishers, and the lack of attentive critics and readers.

The situation with regard to criticism must be especially galling, when the critics who *should* be paying attention so often prefer to write about Elvis and Madonna rather than (as she notes herself) about bell hooks. In PAF's concluding 80-page "Casebook of Postmodern Theory" there is little apparent connection between the preceding 580 pages of fiction and what the critics are concerned with. Jean Baudrillard takes a keen interest in Disneyland, but then he's French and can't be expected to *read* postmodern American fiction. The same holds true for Hélène Cixous, who does, however, mention Mallarmé, and cites Plato, Hegel, and Nietzsche, whom she excoriates for "the repression, repudiation, distancing of woman; a murder that is mixed up with history as the manifestation and representation of masculine power" in a footnote of only three and a half lines. The opening semes of the excerpt from Cixous's *Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays* will be an inspiration to all students who've been required to buy PAF as a required text (and that is surely the book's *raison d'être*), for it is a model of how, postmodernly, to finesse any term paper or exam:

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Where is she?
Activity/passivity
Sun Moon
Culture/Nature
Day/Night

Father/Mother
Head/Heart
Intelligible/Palpable
Logos/Pathos
Form, convex, step, advance, semen, progress.
Matter, concave ground—where steps are taken,
holding- and dumping-ground.
Man_
Woman

How is one to answer this new, non-hegemonic style of discourse? Donna Haraway (born 1944), an American theorist who teaches at the History of Consciousness Program at the University of California in Santa Cruz, offers her answer to that in a key passage from *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*:[2]

Representation	Simulation
Bourgeois novel, realism	Science fiction, postmoderism
Organism	Biotic component
Depth, integrity	Surface, boundary
Heat	Noise

. . . and so on for 27 more dichotomies, concluding with

Sex	Genetic engineering
Labour	Robotics
Mind	Artificial Intelligence
Second World War	Star Wars
White Capitalist Patriarchy	Informatics of Domination

It would not be fair to oppose the mind-privileging language of White Capitalist Patriarchy to a schemata inspired by a feminist-Lacanian discourse, so let me reply in kind to Haraway, Cixous, and the triad of editorial personnel engaged in the issuance of this cultural product:

[2] In PAF this title is footnoted, in part: "Research was funded by an Academic Senate Faculty Research Grant from the University of California, Santa Cruz." The footnote goes on to trace the complex evolution of Haraway's manifesto to a paper delivered at Barnard in 1983.

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Masculine	Feminine
He	She
They (male)	We (female)
Atomic bomb	Hug
New York Times Best-Seller list	Hug

Double talk, double dutch, dutch chocolate
Postmodern, Hostess Cupcakes, hostage taking

Hostage taking, not in the sense advanced by Sherman Alexie in his story in PAF, "Captivity," inspired by a seventeenth-century Indian captivity narrative, but in the sense that the many good writers in PAF act as a kind of human shield for the many more mediocre and lousy writers. None of these good writers are to be blamed for going along for the ride. New readers are born every minute, and what better way to find them than to have a chapter of one's most popular novel assigned as homework? Those who've already read it will be grateful to be spared the task; and among the vast majority who haven't, some might want to read the rest of the book. As to keeping company with no-accounts, it is an accepted ritual of literary life to share the podium with lesser luminaries, and so long as they can be counted on not to look cleverer, what harm can come from it? So, even with the inevitable turndowns from those whose agents or publishers demanded bigger fees than Norton's advance would accommodate (and there are some odd omissions that might account for), a phalanx of A-menu writers would have been a snap to recruit. The rest of the seats would be as easy to fill as lifeboats on the *Titanic.*

In the *New York Times* of November 1, 1997, six scholars were asked what was the Most Overrated Idea of the present day. The philosopher Richard Rorty replied, "The first thing that comes to mind is postmodernism. It's one of those terms that has been used so much that nobody has the foggiest idea what it means. It means one thing in philosophy, another thing in architecture and nothing in literature. It would be nice to get rid of it."

Anyone required to read *Postmodern American Fiction* would surely agree.

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DEAN FLOWER

Looking Backward

IT IS HARD NOT TO SEE JOHN UPDIKE'S LATEST NOVEL as shockingly bad.[1] In a sense he meant it to be. It dramatizes the bitterness, cynicism, despair, and anger of a sixty-six-year-old male whose self-pity and misogyny know few bounds. A retired investment counselor who lives in a magnificent old mansion north of Boston (with acreage, ocean views, deer), Ben Turnbull is frankly, unrepentantly concerned with himself. The book is his daily journal of complaints. He dwells upon his own repulsively aging body, on his every sexual whiff and craving, on his dwindling virility, his insignificance in the vast scheme of things, and his humiliations at golf with his buddies. Irritable and quarrelsome, he views his energetic wife Gloria, who is younger than he, as a killer, an aggressor, a threat. After petty disagreements about a deer that is destroying their shrubs, time forks and it appears that Turnbull has killed Gloria and replaced her with a twenty-three-year-old prostitute, Deirdre, with whom his grossest sexual fantasies can be played out. Sample: " 'You bitch,' I panted, liking this and knowing she liked it too, this damp tangle of commerce and hostility amid the friction of our naked epiderms." Ah, how he likes that friction. Deirdre tells him more than once (not surprisingly), "Jesus, I hate men." But that only eggs him on. When he discovers she is stealing precious heirlooms as well as overcharging for sex, he explodes, "I would beat the thieving slut black and blue next time, tying her wrists and ankles . . ." Further tumid vulgarities deleted, but you get the idea.

Ben Turnbull is a man calculated to enrage women. If you thought Rabbit Angstrom was an ignoble representative of the species, or that the misogyny of Darryl Van Horne (*The Witches of Eastwick*) or Roger Lambert (*Roger's Version*) was repellent, you had better not go near this latest version. He sinks to further degradations—oral and anal pruriences, genital and effluvial obsessions—projecting his intensifying self-disgust upon others, not just on women but on the whole weary apparatus of sexuality, marriage, family feeling and responsibility. Falling in with a gang of teen-agers, he encourages them in the swindling of his neighbors, the destruction of property, and the deaths of more than one person. Or at least he enters imaginatively into such actions, with nary a twinge of conscience. What impelled Updike to

[1] TOWARD THE END OF TIME, by *John Updike*. Alfred A. Knopf. $25.00.

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impersonate such a shockingly bad man? And does that choice make for a shockingly bad novel?

In answer to the first question, I suspect that Updike may have wished—at some level—to provoke his critics. Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times* called it "a lousy book," clearly identifying Updike with his narrator. She decides he is "a selfish, spoiled man" and his book "the clumsy string-pulling of a chauvinistic puppeteer." Unarguably she is right about Turnbull, but I think wrong about Updike. Turnbull is clearly a monster, who shares a great many similarities with his author: the same age and height, similar skin and hair, similar first and second marriages, nearly identical residences, a similar set of married children and grandchildren, an identical fascination with scientific theories of the universe. But Updike is no more Turnbull than he was Rabbit Angstrom or Henry Bech or Tom Marshfield or any other of the male protagonists to whom he has given some of his own traits. Like Nabokov who parodied himself in such egomaniacal monsters as Humbert Humbert and Charles Kinbote, Updike offers up in Ben Turnbull a dark alter ego, a grotesque twisted version of what the author himself might have been. Seen this way, the novel is a form of scorching self-criticism, not complacent self-indulgence. Turnbull's preoccupations are often childish, and they grow more so as the story advances, until a prostate operation and incontinence turn him into a diapered baby toward the end. His reality is made up of fantasies, some self-indulgent, some nightmarish. He is deeply depressed, angry about his aging body, quick to lash out at others, and full of self-pity. Part of the grim irony of this book is that Turnbull has so little to do. Its non-progressive plot is something like *Malone Dies*, but more like *Groundhog Day*, since the fixture of Turnbull's day is walking out to his mailbox and back. He continues to view Gloria (returned to life, running things again) with suspicion, responsive to others but ungenerous to him. She praises the man who comes to solve their deer problem:

> "He *feels* things."
> "And I don't, huh?"
> "Oh, Ben, you do, but everything you feel has to do with yourself. John feels things about *others*."

That comeuppance ought to be definitive, but many critics (not just Kakutani) have failed to appreciate it. The reason may be that Updike's delicate and elegant prose is not always well-suited to the character of a retired investment counselor whose main interests in life are sex, golf, and reading *Scientific American*. Updike's capacity to lavish verbal riches on his point-of-view characters has the unfortunate effect of his seeming to endorse them. It gives them an untoward eloquence. At best one can say that, despite Turnbull's gloomy self-absorption, natural beauty and mystery shine through him, at times redemptively, making a monstrous

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character human and affecting. At worst, however, it endows him with a glory he doesn't deserve.

The End of Time is set in the year 2020 not because Updike wished to write a futuristic novel, but because he wanted it to look backward on the present. Our present realities and securities look so much more fragile then, exposed for the assumptions they are. By the same token our present failures and weaknesses loom larger. Ben Turnbull's world is a dark reflection of our own, but otherwise not greatly different. A world war with China has ravaged the country but left affluent people like Turnbull safe enough; dollars have been replaced by welders (scrip named for a Massachusetts governor); Fed Ex stands in for a debilitated federal government; income tax has been replaced by payoffs to mobsters. But Turnbull's ominous symptoms are all very 1990s familiar: his affluence and cynicism, his nasty exploitativeness and sneaky irresponsibility, his retreat from the world and escapist fantasies, his misogyny and self-hate, his pervasive fear. Turnbull is a lens through which Updike exposes contemporary moral failures. He once said he wanted his writing to convey a sense of life "with a blessing." That blessing now seems harder than ever to find. Which is what makes his latest novel, despite its flaws, shockingly good.

The publication of Bernard Malamud's collected stories provides another occasion for looking backward.[2] Once readily available in paperback, his best single collection of stories—*The Magic Barrel* (1958), which won the National Book Award—has been sadly out of print for a decade. His second collection, *Idiots First* (1963) and his third, *Rembrandt's Hat* (1973), disappeared from the shelves long ago. Even the useful selection of his best work, *The Stories of Bernard Malamud* (1983), with a wry introduction by the author, is no longer available. After Malamud's death in 1986 sixteen additional stories were reprinted along with an unfinished novel, *The People and Uncollected Stories* (1989), to little acclaim. The book was remaindered quickly, despite the fact that it contained extraordinary glimpses into Malamud's formative years, more than a decade of painful trial and error beginning in the Depression. "One day I began to write seriously," he said. "Years of all sorts had gone by." He clerked in Washington, D.C., taught high school in Brooklyn, lived at home with his father (a poor grocer), took an MA degree in English literature, and wrote a dozen stories. Three of them saw print but none turned a profit. His first paid publication was titled, ironically, "The Cost of Living" in 1950. His life still seemed haunted by the Depression, years of failure, heartbreak. Only after moving from New York to Oregon and publishing his first short novel, *The Natural* (1952), did Malamud begin to experience anything like success. He would continue to doubt it for years.

Now it is possible to read the story of that long apprenticeship, with its

[2] THE COMPLETE STORIES, by *Bernard Malamud*. Ed. by *Robert Giroux*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc. $35.00.

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extraordinary consequences and permutations for Malamud's whole career. The stories appear, for the first time, in the order of their writing. The fascination is not biographical. It has to do with the way Malamud figures sadness, discouragement, despair. How did he learn to make a poetry of loss? How did he find in the Yiddish English of immigrant Jews a syntax so expressive?

> "From what he died?—he died, that's all."
> "Answer, please, this question."
> "Broke in him something. That's how."
> "Broke what?"
> "Broke what breaks."

And how did he learn to combine gritty realism with fable and magic, a skeletal beggar taking flight, a filthy life turned fragrant? "Violins and lit candles revolved in the sky." Voiced or not, that sense of celebration concludes many a story here. And how could these grim fables be so funny? Malamud can make you laugh aloud at disasters: "She bit her knuckles and sank down moaning. It could not have been worse." Then come the worse disasters, unrelieved moral failures and betrayals, as in "The Jewbird" or "The German Refugee." Reading all these wonderful stories again, beginning with the tentative and imperfect, is a lesson in hard-earned craftsmanship. And of course it is something more. At the National Book Awards in 1959 Malamud spoke of the mystery of man, "in which poetry and possibility live, though he has endlessly betrayed them." I cannot decide which is more true of Malamud's writing, the assertion or the qualification.

Muriel Spark's newly collected stories tell almost nothing of her long foreground, but she started just as late as Malamud.[3] Born in 1918, she grew up in Scotland, married and went to Rhodesia, gave birth to a son, divorced, returned to London, and eked out a slender existence in editing and publicity. Then in 1951 her first story, "The Seraph and the Zambesi," won a prize. The manner she adopted there—cool, detached, spare, wickedly ironic—has not essentially changed since. The ten new stories in this collection are, overall, shorter and a bit thinly developed compared to earlier tales like "The Ormolu Clock" or "Bang Bang You're Dead," which are richly evolved and prolonged, almost miniature novels. In the former a mild Austrian hausfrau emerges, after the nicest of gradations, as a deadly tyrant. In the latter a woman who has aggravated the narrator since they were children, involving her in endless hypocrisies and rivalries (cruelly, they look alike), is at last mistaken for her by a crazed lover and, in the happiest of endings, shot to death. Dame Muriel is of course famous for such bracing surprises. In another story, for example, "He looked as if he would murder me, and he

[3] OPEN TO THE PUBLIC: New & Collected Stories, by *Muriel Spark*. New Directions. $24.95.

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did." That breathtaking moment, from "The Portobello Road," clarifies much in the story, including the odd fact that its narrator is a ghost.

The recent stories do not quite live up to this high standard. But they are consistently unpredictable, witty, and sardonic. "The Chimes" is a quick murder mystery which appreciates the guilty man's good judgment. "The Thing About Police Stations" is a charming anecdote that turns into a Kafka nightmare of "unspeakable crime." (Don't *ever* go to a police station to inquire after your aunt's little spotted dog.) "Harper and Wilton" is about two characters from an unfinished story who come to life years later, and pester the author. They were guilty of seducing the gardener in the first version, but in the second Harper and Wilton get what modern women want—*he* is guilty of sexual molestation. The best new story is "Open to the Public," the sequel to an earlier tale about a daughter who so loves her father, a famous novelist, that she marries a man who loves her father's works, not her. The old man dies in the sequel and they separate, nastily, only to find themselves oddly meeting as tourists at the houses of famous people—Rousseau, Joan of Arc, Freud, the Brontës—as if under mutual hypnosis. Neither one of them anticipated what happens at the end: they fall in love and burn all of Daddy's precious papers.

The fascination of Spark's storytelling lies in what she gets away with. She has been able to violate almost any rule of fiction. Her narrators range from ghosts to newborn infants. She never writes about herself and yet almost always uses the first person. Just when you expect devastating irony, something odder and more authentic occurs. If death is on the telephone or an angel must be dealt with, Spark makes it seem perfectly normal. John Updike once complained that her stories were a bit slapdash: "like letters from a daredevil friend abroad, they had an unsettling air of concealing more than they told, and of having been posted in haste." This seems to me not an objection at all but a wonderful insight, a key to Spark's method. She loves to use that deceptively chatty, anecdotal, sketchy, slightly impatient or dismissive voice. "I was impressed by the pinkness of Daisy's bedroom. Where on earth did she get her taste in pink?" You do not trust such a narrator, of course, but that is what makes the story so believable. When critics speak of her "brusque" manner or her refreshing clarity ("decisive as smashed glass," said one), they are surely reacting to the daredevil friend whose letters seem so hastily dashed off. Spark's very first story begins, "You may have heard of Samuel Cramer . . . but it doesn't matter if you have not." Even her titles are chatty: "Come Along, Marjorie" and "You Should Have Seen the Mess." So frankly and casually do these stories unfold that we credit them at once. And besides, it is very entertaining to have a daredevil friend like Muriel Spark.

Another backward glance must be made at the amazing career of Penelope Fitzgerald, who has published nine superb novels in England since 1977, when she was sixty-one. Although *Offshore* won the Booker Prize in 1979 and three other works of hers were short-listed for it, Fitzgerald's novels are hard to find in this country, except for *The Blue*

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Flower (1996) and *The Bookshop* (1978),[4] both recently reissued in paperback. *The Bookshop* is Fitzgerald's second novel, and clearly one of her best. Its protagonist, kindhearted Florence Green, attempts to run a bookshop in her soggy little East-Anglian village. But Hardborough discovers, in its provincial wisdom, that it does not want a bookshop, neither one that sells new fiction like *Lolita* (the date is 1959) or one that sells *Every Man His Own Mechanic.* Florence has spent ten years in this place, after her husband's death, trying to survive, "wanting to make it clear to herself, and possibly to others, that she existed in her own right." But everyone in the community cooperates, most of them without guile or intention, to defeat her purposes. Her clear intelligence, practicality, and generosity do her, in the long run, no good at all. The whole story seems wonderfully amusing, from stern little Christine who comes in to help after school to the eccentric hermit Mr. Brundish who so awkwardly and honestly appreciates Florence's worth. There is even an inconvenient ghost and an old horse with the bumbreezes. But the genial, winning details only make the end more agonizing. No wonder critics are saying reckless things, like "the finest British writer alive," about Fitzgerald.

The looking backward of Bernard MacLaverty's fiction is toward Ireland, since he chose to leave his native Belfast and live in Glasgow many years ago. His first two novels, *Lamb* (1980) and *Cal* (1983), powerfully convey in two very different ways the exile's endless anger and despair, loyalty and ambivalence. MacLaverty's latest novel does the same, but in a wholly unexpected way.[5] Its protagonist is a young woman intent upon becoming a famous composer, using music to escape and reshape her identity. Talent has taken Catherine McKenna to Glasgow and a university education, to prizes and some recognition, to contacts with famous composers. Now she finds herself alienated from her working class parents in Belfast, hostile to their Catholicism, estranged from her alcoholic and abusive boyfriend on a remote Scottish island, unable to continue teaching school there, now jobless and dependent on friends in Glasgow, the mother of an illegitimate infant daughter, suffering from clinical depression, trying desperately to compose her music and herself. All these problems are the novel's plot. Unlike *Lamb* and *Cal,* which are basically linear narratives moving suspensefully in the present, *Grace Notes* is recursive and recollective.

So the story begins by going back: Catherine's father, a pub-keeper, has just died and she is flying home after five years of angry estrangement. MacLaverty keeps us intimately in her consciousness: besieged by memories, anxious about her daughter, veering in and out of emotional control. We also experience what Catherine thinks, more calmly and analytically, about music. She is on the *qui vive* for musical ideas. Her interest in passages from Janáček and Shostakovich, Corelli and Hayden, is palpable. So is her receptiveness to unusual instruments, like the

[4] THE BOOKSHOP, by *Penelope Fitzgerald.* Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin. $10.00p.
[5] GRACE NOTES, by *Bernard MacLaverty.* Norton. $23.00.

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terrifying Lambeg drums played by Ulster Protestants that she remembers from her childhood. MacLaverty also makes sure that we hear what Catherine hears, especially the ordinary noises—*hissing* static on the radio, *whooshing* of a vacuum, *scream* of jet engines, *buzz* of pub voices, *drubbing* of tires on the roadway—as if everything were music, or a potential instrument. It is impossible not to share Catherine's experiences without feeling compassion for her, and some hope for resolution of her conflicts.

But that is not quite MacLaverty's design. The book ends with an apparent triumph, the performance of Catherine's symphonic *Vernicle.* It is virtually the story of her life retold in musical form, with all her dissonances voiced and resolved. The terrifying Lambeg drums are in it, bringing chaos at first, but they are controlled, made beautifully expressive by the end. The audience applauds wildly. Catherine seems well on her way to a happier life, and a dazzling career. But in fact the chronological end of the novel occurs halfway through, at the close of Part One, with Catherine depressed and anxious after her father's funeral, warring with her mother, rushing home to her daughter in a frantic quest for reassurance (which she pretends is maternal love). So all of Part Two was retrospective, and its reassuring conclusion deceptive. Catherine is not the triumphant artist she seems to be. At best the ending dramatizes what she hopes her music will do. But the reality is problematic, as many clues in the story suggest. Catherine does not realize her tendency to use people: the Belfast music teacher, Miss Bingham, whom she takes for granted; the famous Russian composer, Melnichuck, whose endorsement she seeks; her convenient babysitter and confidante Liz; even her boyfriend Dave and her infant daughter Anna. So intent was she in playing one of her compositions for Melnichuck that she never realized—despite seeing him stagger and hearing him gasp and fall—that he was having a heart attack. But she claims to have "studied briefly" with him on a publicity blurb. The "grace notes" of the title may be those required to forgive Catherine for her desperate self-absorption. It is a wonderfully enigmatic design, unlike anything MacLaverty has attempted before. Those eager to find a political allegory in the unruly Protestant drums which *seem* to be happily reconciled in Catherine's (the author's?) final music, will have to consider that both the book's Part One (its chronological end) and the first movement of Catherine's symphony break off in confusion, disorder, and irresolution. That seems to be exactly where we are in Northern Ireland today.

When Carol Shields won so many awards for *The Stone Diaries* in 1994, most American readers were unacquainted with her fifteen previous books—novels, poetry, plays, story collections, criticism—which somehow failed to cross the Canadian border as Margaret Atwood's or Alice Munro's have done. (A chiding note in the paperback edition of *The Stone Diaries* identifies her as "an *internationally* known author.") But instead of looking back at what we missed, let's look forward. Shields's

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most recent novel, her ninth, may be her best yet.[6] It is another documentary study of a very ordinary person, Larry Weller, a twenty-seven-year-old unmarried guy, something of a nerd in fact, who still lives with his parents in Winnipeg. In the first chapter he takes someone else's coat by mistake and—in a *tour de force* of attentiveness—we spend a rich fifteen minutes thinking about it (and other things) with him. The next chapter jumps ahead a year, to Larry's honeymoon in 1977. And the next occurs two years after that. By the end of fifteen chapters we have followed Larry painstakingly through two marriages, an astonishing career change, European travel, a new life in Chicago, another in Toronto. Each chapter is a core sample of Larry's life at that moment, focused on some event or subject, packed with detail, and given a title, like "Larry's Words, *1983*" or "Larry's Kid, *1991*." He is confused and lost most of the time, insecure and self-effacing, a perpetual innocent. But he gets interested in mazes, botanical labyrinths of all kinds. He builds one—it's the metaphor of his life, as he dimly recognizes—and it leads him toward goals nobody ever thought he could reach—least of all Larry himself. That is the author's design too. Each chapter begins with a different maze-diagram, and the novel's epigraph is a couplet from 1747: "What is this mighty labyrinth—the earth, / But a wild maze the moment of our birth?"

What makes this book powerful is not so much its central metaphor as its patiently detailed ordinariness. Shields demonstrates, as she did in *The Stone Diaries*, a reverence for the prosaic that lifts it above the prosaic. She travels into the biochemistry of Larry's aging, the sociology of his name, the psycholinguistics of his vocabulary. She even documents the *feel* of Larry's coat pockets, with their old ticket stubs and Kleenex and coins, and "those hard little bits of lint, like meteor grit, that never seem to lose themselves once they've worked into the seams." It's the excessiveness of such attention that turns it into poetry: *like meteor grit.* You would think, after a century that began with Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, that documentary realism would have been exhausted by now. But writers as different as Mona Simpson, Anne Tyler, Jane Smiley, Annie Proulx—and now Carol Shields—keep finding new ways to use it. Read the brilliant climactic scene of *Larry's Party* for a perfect example of her craft. Most of the scene—a party for Larry's friends and family, including his two ex-wives—emerges as undifferentiated conversation. No identifiers or explanations, just nine different people talking, as if overheard by a tape recorder. Their words are so well-meant and inept, their communication so fragmentary and confusing, and yet Shields makes it into a complex weave, a structure in which people reach out to one another and find themselves, at least momentarily, enmeshed in something magical but indecipherable.

Frederick Barthelme has an equally strong sense of life's unpredictability and the irreducible mystery of individuals. But he goes about showing it in such an offhand way that I fear his work has been mistaken for entertainment merely, alongside that of such con artists as Don

[6] LARRY'S PARTY, by *Carol Shields.* Viking. $23.95.

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DeLillo and Elmore Leonard. His ninth novel displays his breezy raconteur's gifts, but something darker and much more touching besides.[7] Here is its splendid first sentence:

> What I'd always liked about Biloxi was the decay, the things falling apart, the crap along the beach, the skeletons of abandoned hotels, the trashy warehouses and the rundown piers jutting out into the dirty water, so I wasn't thrilled that in the last five years our dinky coast town had been turned into an outlet-mall version of Las Vegas, with a dozen cartoon casinos, lots of gussied-up Motel 6 hotel rooms, an ocean of slicked-back hair, and a big increase in unsavory tourists.

The speaker is Ray Kaiser, an out-of-work architect whose eye for sleaze is relentless. His wife Jewel arm-twists him into a trip to the casinos, and he watches unhappily over the next several weeks as she gets hooked. Then he gets hooked too, more deeply and disastrously. Ironic references to Dostoevski's *The Gambler* and *Bob le Flambeur* suggest where Ray's addiction is leading. But the charm of the novel is that nothing evolves in the way you expect. Jewel's daughter seems to hate her stepfather, but subtly their relationship strengthens. A marriage that might have foundered refuses to. Ray's father dies, but that fails to bring him out of his suicidal obsession. Financial ruin occurs, but then again it does not. Improbably they all move in with Ray's mother, which turns out differently and better than anyone imagined. Obvious solutions to Ray's joblessness present themselves and dissolve. Barthelme knows exactly how to play off of conventional domestic formulas, gender expectations, success myths—all the categorical models of our media-driven culture. Gambling comes to stand not for life's gamble but for the whole anxious game of chance that people play with careers and money, images and power, robbing themselves of human value. Ray realizes it near the end of his story: "I wondered why we always try to make things predictable, when it's clear that what happens will always be mysterious and peculiar." Little did he know at the start that *that* was why he hated the unsavory tourists and cartoon casinos. So should we all, says Barthelme, a moralist in disguise.

It seems fitting to close by looking backward to 1948, the first year of *The Hudson Review*. Its fiction reviewers were a distinguished group: Robert B. Heilman (on Dreiser, Trilling, Sartre, and Philip Toynbee), Joseph Frank (on Peter Taylor, Robert Penn Warren, and others), Vernon Young (on Anaïs Nin, Patrick White, and others), William Troy (on Camus and Simone de Beauvoir), R. W. Flint (on Greene, Compton-Burnett, William Maxwell, Elizabeth Spencer, and Delmore Schwartz), and Eudora Welty (on Faulkner). An auspicious start, by any measure. And now there have been forty-nine more years of such distinction, thanks to the acumen and understanding of *The Hudson Review*'s editors. One can only give thanks, and look forward to many more years as rewarding as the past fifty have been.

[7] BOB THE GAMBLER, by *Frederick Barthelme*. Houghton Mifflin. $23.00.

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MARK JARMAN

Solving for X: The Poetry and Prose of Wallace Stevens

I HEARD A YOUNG LITERARY CRITIC SAY RECENTLY that Edgar Allan Poe was beyond criticism. I'm not sure if she meant that Poe was not worth writing about anymore or if he was beyond reproach. Perhaps, she meant both. And perhaps that is what it means to be canonized, if being included in The Library of America series, as Poe has been, means canonization. The Library of America has also added Wallace Stevens to its pantheon.[1] Does that mean Stevens is beyond criticism? For example, is Randall Jarrell's poor opinion of Stevens' late work no longer relevant? There are good reasons for thinking of Stevens as beyond criticism, even as for many contemporary critics of poetry, he remains predominant, "man number one" among the "man-poets," as he called them, of Modernism. Of course, I am aware that the problem with thinking this way, as if the work of any major literary figure were of interest only to literary critics, is limited. Presumably, now that Stevens' poetry, most of his prose, and some of his letters are available in a single volume, he will be more accessible to the general reading public, as he deserves to be. It is clear from reading his collected poetry and prose that among modern American poets his project, though it is hard to describe, is the richest, most sustained, most highly developed, and finally, most relevant to our time or to what his biographer Joan Richardson has called "a century of disbelief." But because his project is hard to describe, the question remains whether or not the bulk of his work is of interest only to literary critics.

Most of the poems for which Stevens is famous come from his first book, *Harmonium*, published in 1923 when he was forty-four. It reads as freshly and strangely and beautifully today as it must have read then. In *Harmonium* life on earth appears as fantastic as life on another planet. If Stevens had never written another poem, or published another book, he would still be read as the author of "In the Carolinas," "Domination of Black," "The Snow Man," "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," "Nuances of a Theme by Williams," "The Comedian as the Letter C," "Valley Candle," "Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks," "A High-Toned Old Christian

[1] WALLACE STEVENS: Collected Poetry and Prose, ed. by *Frank Kermode* and *Joan Richardson*. The Library of America. $35.00.

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Woman," "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," "Sunday Morning," "Anecdote of the Jar," "Gubbinal," "To the One of Fictive Music," "Peter Quince at the Clavier," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," and, though it was added later, "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." I have listed only the poems I believe are best known and most often found in anthologies. For some of these, in that single book, there are other gems of equal worth, and I can imagine another reader's list might include them. It was at the end of his negative review of Stevens' 1950 collection, *The Auroras of Autumn*, that Randall Jarrell made his famous comment about a poet being great if he has been struck by lightning a dozen times. The electrifying poet of *Harmonium* meets that quota.

Whatever it was and is that makes these poems so appealing, a couple of considerations allow us to look at Stevens' first book with a more retrospective awareness. First, the developing aesthetic project of the subsequent books affects the way we read the longest poem in *Harmonium*, "The Comedian as the Letter C," and some of the others, like "Sunday Morning," of course, but also "Palace of the Babies" and "Architecture." Second, thanks to Stevens' own criticism and to his biographer, we can identify the effects of what he was reading and what he had read. The influence of at least two of Stevens' fellow poets in The Library of America series can be detected in *Harmonium*. The gnomic fables of Stephen Crane's poetry are echoed throughout, from the first poem, "Earthy Anecdote," to the last, "To the Roaring Wind." (Stevens attended Crane's funeral in New York in 1900, the year he turned twenty-one, and admired and briefly tried to emulate Crane's career.) The other poet who echoes through Stevens' work, both early and late, is—you thought I was going to say Walt Whitman. In fact, Stevens had little use for Whitman, except for a couple of marvelous images, most notably in "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" ("In the far South the sun of autumn is passing / Like Walt Whitman walking along a ruddy shore"). The other American poet we actually hear in Stevens' poetry is Edgar Allan Poe, whose sound effects and tintinnabulation appear in poems throughout Stevens' career, polished to suavity, but still audible in "the turbulent tinges" that "undulate" in "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws," and in the late poem "Of Mere Being," in which a bird's "fire-fangled feathers dangle down." It is not Poe's sound alone which seems to have influenced Stevens, but also his taste for the exotic, the imagined land where he had never been, the very sort of thing that attracted Baudelaire and Mallarmé, who were in turn favorites of Stevens, so that it is possible the younger American imbibed the older American as he was distilled in the French Symbolists.

The Library of America edition allows us to follow the development of Stevens' poetry and his thought, especially his thought. For after *Harmonium*, Stevens' ambition is to work out a very large idea: to find a substitute for the absence punched through heaven by Darwin and Freud. Helen Vendler in her book on Stevens' long poems correctly

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relates this ambition to his constant aim to write a long poem. Time and again, it seems that either Stevens has succeeded in writing a long poem or he has fallen short. As with the memorable poems in *Harmonium*, we can list the long poems that attempt to work out his great idea. Besides "The Comedian as the Letter C," they include "Owl's Clover," "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War," "Chocorua to Its Neighbor," "Esthétique du Mal," "Description Without Place," "Credences of Summer," "Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction," "The Auroras of Autumn," "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," and "Things of August." Many of the shorter poems that appear with these seem to be corollary or adjunct versions of the longer disquisitions.

Stevens' prose, especially in *The Necessary Angel*, illuminates and confirms, sometimes even clarifies, what he seems to be talking about in his long poems. In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" he informs us that "the soul no longer exists" but that "art sets out to express the human soul" and the poet's role "is to help people live their lives." The consolation the poet offers is imagination, of which art and especially poetry are incarnations. As he says succinctly in his collection of aphorisms, *Adagia*, "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption." In his 1949 essay "Imagination as Value," he comes up against the crux of his thought and resolves it in the person of George Santayana, his friend and mentor at Harvard, but at that time living in retirement in a convent in Rome.

> . . . the function of the imagination is so varied that it is not well-defined as it is in arts and letters. In life one hesitates when one speaks of the value of the imagination. Its value in arts and letters is aesthetic. Most men's lives are thrust upon them. The existence of aesthetic value in lives that are forced on those that live them is an improbable sort of thing. There can be lives, nevertheless, which exist by the deliberate choice of those that live them. To use a single illustration: it may be assumed that the life of Professor Santayana is a life in which the function of the imagination has had a function similar to its function in any deliberate work of art or letters. We have only to think of this present phase of it, in which, in his old age, he dwells in the head of the world, in the company of devoted women, in their convent, and in the company of familiar saints, whose presence does so much to make any convent an appropriate refuge for a generous and human philosopher.

Clearly Stevens believed that there need be no choice between perfecting the life or perfecting the work, if one were allowed to treat both as products of the imagination. A mark of his generation of Modernists, perhaps because of their exposure to philosophers like Santayana and William James, was that belief itself, belief in *something*, was imperative.

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Stevens' prose constantly sends us back to his poetry, so we can be grateful for the generous selection of it in this volume. The short piece, only three paragraphs long, with which he concludes his 1942 collection *Parts of a World*, is one of his most helpful essays, and especially in the following passage:

> The poetry of the work of the imagination constantly illustrates the fundamental and endless struggle with fact. It goes on everywhere, even in the periods that we call peace. . . .
>
> Nothing will ever appease this desire except a consciousness of fact as everyone is at least satisfied to have it be.

An echo of William James, another of Stevens' teachers at Harvard, can be heard in the phrase "consciousness of fact," but "the work of the imagination" is purely Stevens. That this work might be endless and unappeasable and yet might ultimately satisfy everyone tells us something about Stevens' poetry after *Harmonium*. It is one long struggle with a non-fact: the existence of God. He must create a theology from scratch, "as if," as he says in "The Rock," "nothingness contained a métier." That theology or philosophy or aesthetic (or all three) must be based on the recognition that between the human eye and reality, myths are constantly imposing their old forms. The imagination has played a part in creating these myths, and it must be trained to strip them away, even while inevitably it creates new ones. As Professor Eucalyptus says in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," " 'The search / For reality is as momentous as / The search for god.' " Yet the mind reels at these lines from "Credences of Summer":

> The physical pine, the metaphysical pine.
> Let's see the very thing and nothing else.
> Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight.
> Burn everything not part of it to ash.
>
> Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky
> Without evasion by a single metaphor.

Since language itself is metaphor, these imperatives are impossible to satisfy. Robert Frost believed that the attempt of poetry to say matter in terms of spirit and spirit in terms of matter was a great attempt that ultimately failed, because every metaphor eventually broke down. Frost seemed to be satisfied with that knowledge. Stevens is not, and that is why his poetry after *Harmonium* remains important but hard to read.

By hard to read, I do not mean only difficult, requiring the hermeneutic intelligence of a critic, but I mean hard to *keep* reading. Jarrell said bluntly that Stevens' philosophizing was "monotonous." My own point is that reading Stevens after *Harmonium*, especially his long poems,

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is an acquired taste. And yet, having said that, I can go through the later work and find as many wonderful poems as there are in the first book: "The Idea of Order at Key West," "The American Sublime," "A Postcard from the Volcano," "The Men That Are Falling," "The Man on the Dump," "A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts," "Loneliness in Jersey City," "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man," "Martial Cadenza," "Of Modern Poetry," "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," "Large Red Man Reading," "An Old Man Asleep," "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," "The Planet on the Table," and "Of Mere Being." Others will have different lists, but I think most readers would agree that after *Harmonium* Stevens never returned to the wildness and mystery of, say, "Domination of Black" with its peacocks, whose remembered but unstated cry is "Help!" There are no more encounters with the likes of "Berserk" ("Oh, sharp he was / As the sleepless!") and Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan ("Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat! I am the personal"). Even the delectable shorter poems of his later work wear the complexion of his larger endeavor. He always knows what he is after. One way or another, as he tells us in "Mere Being," it is "The palm at the end of the mind, / Beyond the last thought . . . "

That Stevens became enveloped in his philosophy, as surely as Dante was in his cosmology, is a principal reason that we think of him among what are called the High Modernists. Certainly, the poets we place him among, Yeats, Frost, Eliot, and Pound, all recognized the same problem and all had a plan or vision that tried to resolve it. The way each of their careers ends may reflect the efficacy and validity of their visions. Pound ends in incoherence and apology, Eliot in high church Christianity, and Frost in self-congratulation. But Stevens continues to extend the possibilities. There is nothing in the last poems that makes us sorry, as there is in Frost. We may feel that we have heard it before, but not as if we are reading self-parody. There is a serenity to Stevens' attempts to keep finding variables for the imagination, to keep solving for X. He unfolds the endless pleasure of metaphor, of saying "It is" or "It is like," as if all experience could be found to have endless resemblances ("The weather is like a waiter with a tray"; "The moon follows the sun like a French / Translation of a Russian poet"; "The whole race is a poet that writes down / The eccentric propositions of its fate"), and all the while he keeps the placid equanimity of a photograph of Lake Geneva in the summertime. The serenity of late Stevens has an excellence that equals the passion of late Yeats. And that serenity has a music as unique as we find in any of Stevens' contemporaries. We can hear its cool gravity in the opening lines of "The Rock":

> It is an illusion that we were ever alive,
> Lived in the houses of mothers, arranged ourselves,
> By our own motions in a freedom of air.
>
> Regard the freedom of seventy years ago.

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It is no longer air. The houses still stand,
Though they are rigid in rigid emptiness.

Even our shadows, their shadows, no longer remain.
The lives these lived in the mind are at an end.
They never were . . .

A poet friend of mine recently quoted these lines to one of our teachers, himself one of the masters of the older generation, who responded, "Tell me about it."

The publication of a volume in The Library of America series stimulates a desire to grasp an entire career, to understand the whole work once and for all, while at the same time recognizing that the ultimate value of a literary creation, like Stevens' poetry, will never and should never be understood once and for all. Nevertheless, our responses may differ. Poe may be beyond criticism, but the publication of Robert Frost's work by The Library of America has signaled a reassessment of that great but misunderstood poet. The publication of Stevens' collected poetry and prose, made possible by support from the late James Merrill, is further sign of Stevens' eminence at the end of the century, in no small part as the most pervasive influence on contemporary American poetry. Theodore Roethke was simply stating the facts forty years ago when he imagined young poets singing, in "A Rouse for Stevens," "Wallace Stevens—are we *for* him? / Brother, he's our father!" But he was also being prophetic.

And yet a question remains about Wallace Stevens' own parentage. Even though critics have amply supplied lines of descent, especially from the English Romantics, and his biographer, Joan Richardson, has speculated extensively on the influence of French and German poetry on Stevens, as I read from *Harmonium* through his uncollected poems and compare the imagination of the poetry with the exposition of the prose, I hear the voice of one who may be more predecessor than parent, another American poet whose project most resembles Stevens' attempt to create a new faith in poetry. Gender politics has obscured the lines of descent for now, but there is definitely a link, if not a lineage, between Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens. Her epic for the age of disbelief—nearly 1800 poems and innumerable letters—anticipates all the moderns who were Stevens' contemporaries, and her conclusion is most like Stevens' own. Fifty years before the publication of his first book, she wrote:

Those—dying then,
Knew where they went—
They went to God's Right Hand—
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found—

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The abdication of Belief
Makes the Behavior small—
Better an ignis fatuus
Than no illume at all—

"Better an ignis fatuus / Than no illume at all": these lines could have been plucked right out of *Harmonium.* With them Dickinson not only anticipates Stevens' coinages ("illume"), but his sentiments. He pays her homage, perhaps unwittingly, with the following lines from a late poem, "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour."

We say God and the imagination are one . . .
How high that highest candle lights the dark.

At this remove, their visions do seem much the same, and hers seems even more daring and radical because of when and how it occurred. Recent critical theory sees only daughters for Emily, but Wallace has to look like a son or at least a nephew. Incidentally, she has yet to be included in The Library of America series. It must be about time.

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R. S. GWYNN

Fwame Wesistent Suits

A POET'S SENSE OF PERSONAL IDENTITY can be either a blessing or a curse. No one ever accused Mr. Yeats of failing to find new ways to be fascinated with himself, and Ms. Dickinson's upstairs nutshell allowed her room enough to be queen of infinite space. But poetic identity can also be a trap, and the gentle reader wilts before the umpteenth installment of X's doomsday decrees or Y's latest variation on a theme with bodily fluids. Reading many poets, one gets the impression of the lyre having been plucked so fervently that only one string remains, with subject and manner constricted to the short range of tones it allows. "Hey," we murmur, "we've heard *that* song before," flipping the pages faster and faster.

One of the funniest, and wisest, statements of this predicament may be found in a poem called "Maybe Dat's Your Pwoblem Too" by Jim Hall, in which the superhero Spiderman shares bed and bath with a secret identity who sounds unaccountably like Elmer Fudd:

> I tink I twy sometin diffunt. I tink I twy
> *sometin excitin like wacing cawrs. Sometin to make*
> my heart beat at a difwent wate.
> But den you just can't quit being sometin like
> SPIDERMAN.
> You SPIDERMAN for life. Fowever. I can't even
> buin my suit. It won't buin. It's fwame wesistent.
> So maybe dat's youwr pwoblem too, who knows.
> Maybe dat's da whole pwoblem wif evwytin.
> Nobody can buin der suits, dey all fwame wesistent.

Mr. Hall at least came up with one solution, giving up poetry for a successful career as a crime novelist. But perhaps that wumpled suit has pwoven just as fwame wesistent as its pwedecessor.

Poets can and do change identities, though. After publishing several highly praised books as Marilyn Nelson Waniek, her new collection[1] arrives under the name of Marilyn Nelson, to the despair of many catalogers. Nelson's poetry, however, still smells as sweet, covering an impressive range of subjects and techniques. *The Fields of Praise* is broken into four sections: "Mama and Daddy," "The Homeplace," "Hermitage,"

[1] THE FIELDS OF PRAISE: New and Selected Poems, by *Marilyn Nelson.* Louisiana State University Press. $24.95; $16.95.

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and "Still Faith." I have no quarrel with this arrangement, but I regret the downscaling of Nelson's "The Homeplace," a narrative sequence that begins with the poet's great-great-grandmother Diverne's affair with the son of her white owner:

> Diverne might not have known the starburst joy
> her son would give her. And the man who came
>
> out of a twelve-room house and ran to her
> close shack across three yards that night, to leap
> onto her cornshuck pallet. Pomp was their
>
> share of the future. And it wasn't rape.
> In spite of her raw terror. And his whip.

The racial boundaries, once trespassed, prove no obstacle to a subsequent generation; years later octogenarian Aunt Geneva apostrophizes "her old, white lover" thus:

> *I need to buy some things,*
>
> *So next time, bring more money.*
> *And bring more moxie, too.*
> *I ain't got no time to waste*
> *on limp white mens like you.*
> .....
> *Now listen: take your heart pills*
> *and pay the doctor mind.*
> *If you up and die on me,*
> *I'll whip your white behind.*

This makes me hunger even more for the poems deleted from the original. In one, Diverne's son is urged to run for local office. While he is trying to make up his mind, he receives a visit from two unexpected guests, his white half-brothers: "*It ain't your fault you had a nigra mother.* / They said they'd stand behind him if he ran." This gesture might not pass for gallantry with all parties, but it bespeaks a fundamental decency that Nelson is willing to extend to characters who might otherwise have become stock-company heavies in bedsheets.

The titles of two of Nelson's sections reveal a strong religious strain, most evident in a beautifully executed sonnet sequence called "Thus Far by Faith," which chronicles the career of a slave who begins his evangelical career by preaching to mules, and in another group about "Abba Jacob." Abba Jacob is a kind of saintly schlemiel who resembles, if such were possible, a cassocked Woody Allen. He forgets early mass "so often the parish council / has suggested the police / might fetch me every Wednesday, / with flashing lights and sirens." Abba Jacob is a likable Everyperson but lacks shoulders broad enough to bear the cross of some two dozen

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poems. Nor is Nelson playing to her strength in the book's final section, which contains new poems on contemporary social ills—sexual abuse, animal rights, AIDS—and one titled, tabloid-style, "Woman Kills and Eats Own Infant." Her long suit is compassion and the small acts of charity that constitute grace. Several of her best poems are about the Tuskeegee Airmen of World War II fame. In one the narrator relates how "On the night before a mission / you gave a buddy / your hiding-places / as solemnly / as a man dictating / his will." When a flyer dies in a strafing run, his buddy finds himself in possession of his stash, including a coveted air mattress:

> I found his chocolate,
> three eggs, and a full fifth
> of his hoarded-up whiskey.
> I used his mattress
> for the rest of the tour.
>
> It still bothers me, sometimes:
> I was sleeping
> on his breath.

In her notes Nelson says that this was spoken to her over lunch by one of the surviving flyers. Sometimes a poet can best express her own identity by simply remaining quiet and listening.

Leon Stokesbury (b. 1945) is four months older than Nelson and, like her, must have concluded that passing the mid-century mark provided an appropriate occasion for a retrospective volume.[2] The white Southern male poet faces a dilemma: how best to demonstrate that a Southern background should not necessarily limit one to the "3-D" subject list (*my dog* and *my Daddy* are the first two) that a prominent Northern critic once ascribed, not unfairly, to an equally prominent Southern poet. Stokesbury edited an anthology of contemporary Southern poetry and is thus aware of the problem; a polite refusal to be pigeonholed may lie behind taking the title of *Autumn Rhythm* from Jackson Pollock, a painter whose work exhibits only the most tenuous ties to any notion of subject matter:

> No, never lariat loops or
> swoops, or bird droppings
> in bruised wine, as some ass
> once said. No oil of tears.
> Never, probably, any dark
> intermingling of asterisks
> or octopi.

The mainstream of contemporary American poetry flows gently around many generic subjects: poems about paintings (there must be

[2] AUTUMN RHYTHM: New and Selected Poems, by *Leon Stokesbury*. University of Arkansas Press. $25.95; $15.95.

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enough Georgia O'Keeffe poems by now to fill a Library of America volume), elegies for relatives, poets, and friends, and meditations on the icons of popular culture are three staples, and Stokesbury has several of each. Still, he has taken to heart one precept of Cousin Edgar ("Keeping originality *always* in view . . ."); in one poem the painterly conceit (van Gogh as revised by Dali) places an ex-lover

> Over more to the left,
> I think, yes, under that smeared vision
> of crows, way out in those dark, waist-high
> weeds, there, leaning against that
> huge pile of horseshit, yes, and a little
> nearer the vanishing point, thank you.

Poe once claimed that the ideal voice for a poem is that of the *bereaved* lover; here *pissed-off* has become the operative term.

Stokesbury is deeply immersed in popular culture, and he likes to remind the reader that Shakespeare and Twain were popular artists; both are omnipresent, the latter most prominently in "*The Royal Nonesuch*," a tribute to a poet whose comedian's mask could not conceal a fatal pathos of alcoholism and despair. The book's final poem is a remarkable collision of pop and Pop; the poet's elegy for his father is titled "Señor Wences and the Man in the Box." A son's valediction is delivered in the accents of an old-time television ventriloquist. I would be remiss if I did not mention two particular successes of pop cultural assimilation, "Day Begins at Governor's Square Mall" and "Evening's End." The former, in tones balanced between Wordsworth and Byron, describes a climate-controlled "environment" where waters, instead of "rolling from their mountain-springs / With a soft inland murmur," now erupt indoors, on cue from a municipal main. The latter poem, "Evening's End," is a plainspoken narrative that relates the poet's acquaintance with his generation's most affecting casualty to romantic angst, Janis Joplin. At undergraduate parties she would release her brown hair from its prim bun, bend to the guitar, and transform herself:

> How low and guttural, how
> slow and torchlit, how
> amber her song, how absolutely
> unlike the tiny nondescript
> a few minutes before.

Her affair with another student ends badly, of course—another woman in bed and the singer fleeing the scene of the crime for San Francisco, fame, and early death. "It was summertime," concludes Stokesbury. "Thus runs the world away." In a poet whose personality is so clearly

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stamped on his poems, this tactical pulling-back into allusion and quotation comes as an agreeable surprise.

I would not have thought to list Alfred Corn among Southern poets, but several poems in *Present*[3] remind me that he grew up in deepest Georgia, where memories of the landscape "recall a scent, the pervasive smell of burning pinewood that came from gray, unpainted shacks." Down home provided a hard bed of nurture for a lad with aesthetic sensibilities ("anyone who wanted to see paintings had to go somewhere else"), and when an unprepossessing stature is factored into the equation even finding something to read becomes an ordeal:

> Most Saturdays included a trip to our local Carnegie library, a snug sanctuary built of brick and marble. A dreaded obstacle was the phalanx of bullies often waiting on the lawn outside to pounce on the skinny little weirdo who didn't like to trade punches with them, which would have been the only path to equality and friendship. My humiliating response to being pushed to the ground and pummeled was merely to lie still until the attackers got bored and left. After which I'd get up, adjust myself, and trudge onward.

Onward, indeed, to an epiphany in an art book, a reproduction of Goya's *Don Manuel Osorio Manrique de Zuñiga*; the painting graces the cover of *Present* and seems to have spelled out for the nascent poet the immeasurable gap between the world of art and sensibility and his own crabbed, middle-class upbringing. Again, the specter of Poe must have loomed large, if only to be exorcised in later years: "It was a natural mistake for me at age ten to see art as portraying an unflawed beauty and felicity that must exist *somewhere*. A reckonable amount of it is just that; but more often the drawbacks of incarnation are art's besetting subject, the spirit in its cage of flesh subject to desire, drunkenness, illness, punches to the gut, failing vigor, and at last a severing from flesh that despite everything always seems to come too soon."

This duality is no idle observation; both personally and aesthetically, Corn seems to be somewhat at odds with himself. He is an accomplished prosodist who has recently published a handbook of poetics, yet his most sustained effort here is the prose essay quoted above. (I hesitate to use "prose poem" for a piece that must of necessity include sentences like "Notable paintings of the year include the tapestry cartoon *The Festival of San Isidro*, and there was also a *Saint Francis of Borgia Exorcising a Demonized Dying Man*.") On the other hand, in "To Hermes" he trots out the tricky English hendecasyllabic in a prayer for a rather different kind of elevation:

> I have a young partner, handsome and eager,
> whose love I want, whose pleasure pleases me.

[3] PRESENT, by *Alfred Corn*. Counterpoint. $22.00.

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> When a smile as mischievous as his seems to ask
> for a second round or a third, naturally
> every spurred nerve aches to pump up the tempo,
> like a dark horse the last heat of the day,
> sweatsoaked and burning to win. My age, though,
> men are long past the satyrs we once were,
> flesh quickens or not after its own will or whim.

Many of the poems evoke exotic locales like Caesarea or the Alfama district of Lisbon, while others are squarely set on native soil. An example of the latter is "Wonderbread," which is wittily (and accurately) identified as "a pun for bread, seductive / visually, but you could starve." While I enjoy spanning the globe with Corn and can admire the cultural sophistication he brings to poems on figures like Bach, Kafka, and Balanchine, I prefer poems with a little grit under their fingernails, or a little *Comet* in the case of "A Marriage in the Nineties," which combines household chores, a bit of "Adam's Curse" ("*Better go down upon your marrow-bones, //* and so forth. How much did a man with servants / know about it?"), and a catalog of gripes about the City, which "if we sign papers, will consider us / 'domestic partners.' " All in all, this is a charming performance.

Patricia Goedicke's *Invisible Horses*[4] is aptly titled, for it took me several readings to locate those sneaky critters in the 150-plus pages of her book. Or perhaps that's the point. They are meant to be elusive, like thoughts. One desperately wants to save them (horses, thoughts—whatever) from the burning stables:

> You try to lead them out
> with the halter of the word *like,*
>
> but even with the tiniest stitches, the most delicate
> intracerebral loops
>
> there's no lassoing them . . .

It's a shame, but that's the way it is with invisible horses; you think you've got your rope around the neck of one and—Poof!—all your wrangling comes to naught. I don't doubt for a moment that Goedicke knows what she is doing; her epigraphs are drawn from Einstein, Hume, and Nietzsche, and a long list of works credits "the neurophysical backgrounds" of the poems. Still, this is poetry so concerned with the evanescence of consciousness (*self*-consciously so, I am tempted to say) that external events intrude only as points of departure for the poet's receding trains of thought. The reader, alas, is likely to be left stranded on the platform.

[4] INVISIBLE HORSES, by *Patricia Goedicke.* Milkweed Editions. $12.95p.

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Consider one example, the beginning of "Baskets That Hold Nothing":

> Mind like wickerwork, crisscrossed
> baskets that hold nothing, gatherings
> that almost but not quite come together.
> Though they may have, in the beginning,
> with each side of the gap
> in the tender skull knitting itself to the other,
> what governments, what grand cathedrals we have made
> and then abandoned:
> now, in Shea Stadium
> wind brushes yesterday's pennants
> around the field in tatters.

The point being, I suppose, that the mind creates temporal constructs of order that it is constantly forced to modify as new stimuli dictate. But that which no longer has any use still has a way of persisting; we cannot will ourselves to forget. Names are erased but faces linger, drifting further from their connections to time and place. If Goedicke's aim is to make the reader think about the thoughts he or she is thinking, she has succeeded, I think. *Cogito ergo cogito.* Nevertheless, after a few repetitions I begin to feel trapped in an endlessly repeated double feature of *Last Year at Marienbad* and *Groundhog Day.*

To be fair to Goedicke, when I encountered some of these poems in magazines I was mostly struck by their virtues—the way metaphor unfolds into metaphor, the poet's felicity with phrase and syntax, the obvious intelligence lying behind the task—but seeing them collected in an overlong volume only makes their technical and thematic limitations more obvious. The various stanzaic arrangements and patterns of indentation, meant, I imagine, to lend variety and visual fluidity, begin to look like camouflage designed to hide an underlying sameness. In only a handful of poems (a rather funny one about a six-month-old child; another about the poet's deaf mother and her passion for music) are Goedicke's too-abundant correlatives tethered to an objective one can honestly take to heart.

Unlike Goedicke, Peter Makuck's poems[5] do not suffer from any shortage of externals; they are full of the smells of sand and salt, of woodsmoke and the stinkbait of lobster traps, and Makuck can trace the Whistlerean shadows of boats in fog as well as the sharp delineations of salt marshes and their denizens (including not only herons and egrets but also a skinny-dipping Adam and Eve—"jiggle and moon up the ladder, / giggle and kiss"). Makuck's usual stomping grounds are coastal areas from Connecticut to North Carolina, but he is equally adept at evoking the Arizona desert:

[5] AGAINST DISTANCE, by *Peter Makuck.* BOA Editions. $20.00; $12.50.

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The air was sweet
as remembering the way
your life can happen
one cactus wren at a time,
that shy singing
into what will soon be dark.

Reading Makuck, I am reminded how as a child much of my own sense of identity was shaped by reading my father's copies of *True*, a magazine easy to dismiss as a relic of a bygone Age of Macho yet home to some fine writers. The stories in *True* possessed a consistent *ethos*: that it was sometimes *necessary* for ordinary people to perform extraordinary actions that only in hindsight could be labeled heroic. I don't know if Makuck read *True*, but the rule obtains in the case of his title poem, an account of how the poet, more out of instinct than from any definable motive, leaps from a fishing pier to help a boy being swept away by a vicious rip tide:

In a few seconds, I knew,
he'd quit the tube and try for shore,
so I dove,
unable even later to remember
dropping my rod and reel,
removing sandals or climbing the rail,
seeing only the reflected arrow
of a body break the surface,
my lucky face
escaping a web of lines and hooks.

What transpires is a mini-version of Crane's "The Open Boat," with the facade of each beachfront house reflecting the glare of an idol of indifference: "The face, like some false god, / commanded belief, gloated, / with a sunstruck paneglass eye. / For a moment, / just a moment, I was ready to believe, / to sacrifice whatever it wanted. . . ." I suspect it took a few years for Makuck to sort this material out and determine how to use it without sounding self-congratulatory. For once, the poet-as-ordinary-guy *does* become the hero of his own life:

air-conditioned as anyone,
thinking of saving
and of being saved

by a boy
who could have been my son
and kept me from drowning.

I am glad that Makuck's suit has pwoven not only fwame wesistent but waterpwoof as well.

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DAVID MASON

Subdividing Parnassus

"PARNASSUS HAS MANY MANSIONS," wrote W. H. Auden, and lo, it is true. But to this reader of contemporary poetry there are also a good many hovels, dingy little flats with overstuffed ashtrays, bluesy tenements, rent-controlled walk-ups passed along among cronies, cottages where late the sweet birds sang, time-share condos and cramped trailer parks. There are prefab duplexes, barbed-wire Gulags, houseboats, treehouses, cafes with spittle on the microphones, ranches of isolation, cardboard boxes and tidy townhouses, houses we ogle, houses we pass without a look. Parnassus has seen it all. That overloaded summit has been bought, sold, conquered, lost, fought for, betrayed, adorned, polluted, blasted clean by the snowfall, flash-flooded and parched. And here come the assessors of this year's value, and there goes the neighborhood when the wrong sort of poet moves in. World without end, amen.

Despite all this activity, all the critical opinions lobbed over its slopes, the mountain is still there, swarming with poets in their millions until, from a distance, it resembles nothing so much as an anthill. Though we might well despair when we visit those large, dull districts where everything looks the same, we occasionally find, as we turn some corner or look up a lost cul-de-sac, unexpected delight in the power of artistry. It's not only the mansions that move us, but also the smaller dwellings so replete with remembered life, the furniture just so, a book left open by the bed, the secret self just beyond our knowledge.

I don't know where J. V. Cunningham, who died in 1985, will ultimately be settled on these slopes, but his austere lodging, perhaps designed by a student of Frank Lloyd Wright (with a wet bar tucked under a rocky overhang), will not be shaken by any fashionable earthquakes. He is a poet of shrivelled spirit, but his short poems are not to be dismissed. Anthologies and textbooks usually present him only as an epigrammatist—witty, but dry and abstract. This is the view that allowed William Logan, our least merciful reviewer, to misunderstand Cunningham in a recent issue of *The New Criterion*, and to do so without considering Cunningham's strongest work. Of course Cunningham did write a great many epigrams, some of them wonderful, some not, and he frequently wrote as if he had never read Pound's Imagist dictum, "Go in fear of abstractions," which has become law in modern poetry.

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Conceptions
Cold as the serpent and as wise
Have held my eyes:
Their fierce impersonal forms have moved my pen.

These lines, concluding a poem called "*L'Esprit de Géométrie et L'Esprit de Finesse*," reflect the soul of a poet who taught mathematics to Army pilots during World War II. He was a literary maverick, steeped in Latin and Renaissance poetry, but also one of our finest poets of the American West, as we can see in his 17-line narrative, "Montana Fifty Years Ago":

Gaunt kept house with her child for the old man,
Met at the train, dust-driven as the sink
She came to, the child white as the alkali.
To the West distant mountains, the Big Lake
To the Northeast. Dead trees and almost dead
In the front yard, the front door locked and nailed,
A handpump in the sink. Outside, a land
Of gophers, cottontails and rattlesnakes,
In good years of alfalfa, oats and wheat.
Root cellar, blacksmith shop, milk house, and barn,
Granary, corral. An old *World Almanac*
To thumb at night, the child coughing, the lamp smoked,
The chores done. So he came to her one night,
To the front room, now bedroom, and moved in.
Nothing was said, nothing was ever said.
And then the child died and she disappeared.
This was Montana fifty years ago.

Cunningham's unsentimental poem suggests its drama in the sparest terms; the key line is "Nothing was said, nothing was ever said." While I would never argue that Cunningham is great in the ways Frost, Whitman and Dickinson are great, I do think he wrote some necessary poems. The lower slopes of Parnassus, too, are worth visiting.

Timothy Steele's new edition of Cunningham's poems must have been a labor of love.[1] Steele studied with Cunningham at Brandeis, and his own poetry shows the influence of his teacher, as well as of Frost and Wilbur. Some readers will be alarmed that the verse fills only half of this volume, while the rest is devoted to notes and commentary. Steele knows how this must look, and begins his introduction by quoting from Cunningham's ironic warning "To the Reader," in which "The text was loss" while "The gain is gloss." Steele's glosses occasionally tell us more than we need to know, but they also make good use of Cunningham's

[1] THE POEMS OF J. V. CUNNINGHAM, by *J. V. Cunningham*. Ed. with an introduction and commentary by *Timothy Steele*. Swallow Press/Ohio University Press. $28.95; $16.95.

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own prose, as well as other sources. And the introduction corrects false impressions, such as the all-too-common notion that Cunningham was completely under the spell of Yvor Winters while at Stanford. It's only in an appendix on "Cunningham's Versification" that I really disagree with Steele, who scans as if he doesn't believe in the existence of spondees and, to my ear, makes Cunningham out to be more rhythmically monotonous than he actually is.

This small *oeuvre* contains a large percentage of quotable lines, such as the imagistic epigram called "Night-piece," or this bitter little number from the sequence, *Doctor Drink*:

> Lip was a man who used his head.
> He used it when he went to bed
> With his friend's wife, and with his friend,
> With either sex at either end.

In 1964, Cunningham published another sequence of short poems entitled *To What Strangers, What Welcome*, in which we follow an unnamed protagonist on a mysterious journey, a sort of despairing quest through America, from east to west and back again. Though it contains only fifteen poems and, in this edition, takes up eight spare pages, I like to think of it as an important longer poem. Here is one of its more lyrical sections:

> The night is still. The unfailing surf
> In passion and subsidence moves
> As at a distance. The glass walls,
> And redwood, are my utmost being.
> And is there there in the last shadow,
> There in the final privacies
> Of unaccosted grace,—is there,
> Gracing the tedium to death,
> An intimation? Something much
> Like love, like loneliness adrowse
> In states more primitive than peace,
> In the warm wonder of the winter sun.

Such intimations of warmth, if we can call them so, are rare in Cunningham's verse, and for some he will always seem too cynical, too constricted a poet. Whatever your opinion of his tough-minded vision, read him at least as an antidote to the exalted blatherers among us.

David R. Slavitt is another writer whom it would be hard to categorize. I can't imagine what sort of dwelling he would have on Parnassus, but it must be a busy place, perhaps with a large-screen TV over the Roman bath. Author of more than sixty books of fiction, nonfiction and verse, Slavitt is best known to some of us for his energetic translations of Virgil, Ovid, Seneca and other Latin poets. His latest book combines several of

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the genres in which he has worked.[2] It begins with sixty-seven epigrams from the Welsh Renaissance poet, John Owen (ca. 1563-1622), who wrote in Latin, followed by Slavitt's own verse commentary on *The Faerie Queene* and other matters.

As a translator, Slavitt does not slavishly follow the forms of Owen's originals, but makes spritely, liberated versions. For example, #67, a two-line epigram by Owen, becomes a 15-line romp in Slavitt's vernacular:

> Ya want to be happy
> as Mr. Clam?
> Then you've got to learn how
> not to give a damn.
>
> The fellow who frets
> and worries all night
> is the one who is hanging
> on too tight,
>
> counting his blessings,
> his children, his wife,
>
> his nice house
> and his lovely life . . .
>
> He knows he is going to kick the bucket.
>
> He's got to learn how
> to shrug and say, "Fuck it."

In other cases, such as #36, in which we get an English couplet for a Latin one, Slavitt's versions seem closer to Owen's: "Errors from error, as rumors from rumor grow, / one flake at a time to cover the world with snow."

In the "epic" half of the book we have "Duessa's Version: A Dirge in Seven Canticles." Some dirge! Reading it, I wished I remembered more of my Spenser, but I was able to enjoy Slavitt's braiding of narrative and commentary. This is satire in its original, catchall sense, with a revisionist female narrator who can shape-change and time-travel at will. Spenser's Redcrosse Knight becomes "A dim hunk" who seems not to mind that "Una is fucking / somebody else, and loving it, groaning and squeaking / in lewd delight." Slavitt can't resist drawing parallels with the current Windsors:

[2] EPIC AND EPIGRAM, by *David R. Slavitt.* Louisiana State University Press. $19.95; $11.95.

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> You read this stuff as freshmen
> on your way to that degree that served to admit you
> "with all the rights and privileges appertaining"
> to the middle class. That class has disappeared,
> as English itself has dwindled. It's dead European
> White Men's bullshit, and Gloriana whirls
> in her grave like a dervish, as Lizzie II must shudder
> every morning when they bring in "the tabloids, ma'am."
> In a ruined castle, she wonders whose toes will be sucked
> in today's telephoto pictures.

He also can't have foreseen how real life would dish him another irony. When "Di, a bulemic loony," enters the scene as Spenser's descendant and wife of the Prince of Wales, Slavitt indulges a prophetic pun: "Are the overpaid drunks at *People* / and those even trashier papers at check-out counters / wrong? Enough of Di! Die, Di!" Maybe it's a good thing that no one at *The Star* or *The National Enquirer* reads poetry, otherwise Slavitt would now become bait for conspiracy theorists. If you grow tired of the usual fare in contemporary American poetry—or what Ted Kooser has called "The Poetry of the Ingrown Toenail"—you can knock on Slavitt's door for a bit of civilized fun.

Or you can turn to a real epic poem, the posthumously-published *Byrne*, by Anthony Burgess.[3] A novelist, composer, poet, translator, linguist and screenwriter, Burgess would likely have a brilliantly messy pad on Parnassus, whatever the elevation. *Byrne* has usually been reviewed as a novel. It can be compared to *Nothing Like the Sun* for its wordplay, to *Earthly Powers* for historical sweep. As poetry, it won't satisfy those readers who dislike Byron or Auden's "Letter" to the same Lord, but why they deny themselves such anarchic pleasures is beyond me.

The protagonist, Michael Byrne, is a "Failed artist but successful bigamist" who collaborates with the Nazis, then disappears after the war, at the end of the book's well-paced opening section. By this time the attractions of Burgess' comic *ottava rima* somehow make the amorality of his title character even more unsettling. The remainder of this epic follows Byrne's children, particularly the twin sons, Tim and Tom, on a quest for the meaning of their father's life in a changing Europe. In fact, *Byrne* eventually proves a tragicomic meditation on Europe in the twentieth century.

Yet this plot and these meditations cannot convey the book's full flavor. If, as Auden thought, a poet is foremost a person who loves words, then Burgess was a genuine poet. *Byrne* isn't a perfect book—it sometimes loses necessary speed and clarity—but at its best it frustrates reviewers only by offering more quotable passages than we have space for. There are delightful rhymes like "horror" and "Gomorrah," and

[3] BYRNE, by *Anthony Burgess*. Carroll & Graf. $20.00.

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Burgess also avoids monotony in stanza form, switching to Spenser's nine-liner for one section, adding a song in another. The "poetaster" narrator comments on his own technique, at one point donning "the bard's apparel / To give five restive sonnets to John Gielgud, / Who'll read them now." We get satirical asides on "the sheer / Calvinity" of America, on artists like Carl Orff and Graham Greene. And we get characters like the sexy, one-handed slut, Claudine, whose terrorist organization is called CHAOS. In one scene, she mistakes the priestly Tim for his twin, Tom, who has lost his scrotum to what sounds like cancer:

> This was no time for stating his identity
> Any more than when hearing a confession.
> She dragged him to the bedroom, a male entity
> She thought she knew, and he had the impression
> It was sheer warmth she wanted. As he lent it, he
> Felt in the stimulation of the flesh an
> Untoward sense of holiness hold sway,
> Like Flaubert's Julien l'Hospitalier.
>
> But this girl was no leper, merely bruised
> And shocked, and her right hand was bandage-bound,
> Young, British (why?), and bodily abused,
> Although her sexual appetite seemed sound.
> She sighed, he warmed her, but as yet refused
> Erotic contact. Her left fingers found
> His scrotum, and she cried, as well she might,
> 'Oh Jesus Christ, they've put the bugger right.'

Burgess ends his story, after a sinister encounter between father and children, by "Blessing the filthy world." Well, bless him for having the balls to write it in verse.

So far, I have considered two dead writers and a living one with over sixty books to his name. Now I turn to two interesting first books that came my way. William Baer's *The Unfortunates* won the 1997 T. S. Eliot Prize, and has been handsomely produced by New Odyssey Press.[4] Baer edits *The Formalist*, a journal devoted to lyric poetry in traditional forms, so I was surprised to find his debut volume composed entirely of small narratives, brief vignettes from other peoples' lives, sometimes identified in titles like "The Cuban Girl," "Telephone Psychic" and "The Confidence Man." This willingness to look outside himself, bringing a wide range of human subjects to the short poem, deserves high praise. The book's numerological tidiness—thirty-seven poems of two eight-line stanzas, three longer poems containing nine stanzas each of the same length—conveys deliberateness upon these mostly untidy lives. At their

[4] THE UNFORTUNATES, by *William Baer*. New Odyssey Press. $25.00.

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best, the poems balance lyric and narrative impulses, as we can see in "Main Reading Room":

> Worn out, he pushed the Renaissance aside:
> *Die Kultur*, Burckhardt's great Italian dreams—
> what better way to pass this rainy day?
> But tired now, he needed a little walk,
> and rest, and since the reading room was mostly
> full of books and academics, he wandered
> down the empty corridors, until
> he saw them standing there, alone, together:
>
> Young lovers, waiting out the August rain—
> drenched, lost in her hair, he held her close,
> who pressed her open mouth across his neck. . . .
> Later, in the quiet reading room,
> for all the rest of that long day and night,
> he thought of you, and fifteen years ago—
> the smell of your hair in the north shore summer night,
> your tender touch, your warm, wet, wild mouth.

Other good poems include "Runway" and "The Shipmaster's Note," which takes its cue from *Frankenstein.*

But I also think Baer's structure is too formally deterministic; not all of these stories fit into sixteen lines. Short poems cannot bear the prosy exposition we get in "Magnum XL-200":

> *Sure* it was embarrassing: an overweight, middle-
> aged man who spent his vacations riding rollercoasters.
> But he didn't care. The panic distracted his mind
> from his boring job, the inconsiderate wife,
> and their whacked-out, dropped-out, wise-assed, teenage
> sons.

What's missing is partly the verbal and metrical precision of an E. A. Robinson, partly a willingness to let these characters breathe a little and escape the confines of Baer's preconceptions. If Baer is building himself a house somewhere on Parnassus, he'll want sturdier carpentry and a few more windows.

Maureen Bloomfield's first book arrives from the James Dickey Contemporary Poetry Series, edited by the ubiquitous Richard Howard.[5] As its title suggests, *Error and Angels* is a collection of oppositions and juxtapositions. It opens with several contemporary urban scenes given Dantesque echoes, and throughout the book I sense Bloomfield's belief

[5] ERROR AND ANGELS, by *Maureen Bloomfield.* University of South Carolina Press. $15.95; $9.95.

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in patterns and continuities (the author's note says that she is also an art critic, which explains the wordy obscurity of her weakest poems). The book lacks cumulative power and force, anything that chills me to the bone or takes off the top of my skull, to paraphrase Emily Dickinson; too many of its poems feel like forays, avoiding closure. Yet I finished the book impressed by Bloomfield's acuity—a kind of formal intelligence even in poems that felt cluttered and unfinished. Perhaps only an art critic could say about death that "every / Body is a reliquary: the numinous in its own box." Or comment on a young girl in a painting who "Holds the wake of her blue dress." Even when I am not sure what she's getting at, I admire her effort to "know / What it is to live in time and to forgive."

A lot of the art Bloomfield considers is religious art, and I would have liked a stronger sense of the person behind these obsessions. A stronger dramatic sense, too, would give this questing intelligence someplace to go, as I surmise from the cogent collage of her poem "Charing Cross," which concludes as follows:

> She seems too shy to have
> Asked anyone for money; she asks me, then jangles
> Like a gypsy but in black redolent of Shalimar
> To duck beneath the jagged turnstiles.
> "I'll be okay," she calls. "I know where I'm going."
> *And I know who I love*—if and only if *ostinato*
>
> The condition repeats because it isn't true—
> *She measured her love to show him*
> *Go in and out the window*
> She followed him to London
> Where is he going now, he was going with her
> *As we have gone before*—
> The one the dear Lord knew she wouldn't marry.

More of the simplicity and clarity of the folksongs quoted here would have helped. For Bloomfield, I would advocate some housecleaning, giving more polish to individual poems.

Enid Shomer's third collection, *Black Drum*, also contains a sequence of poems based upon paintings and sketches.[6] In one of them Shomer informs us, "I have always balked / at the purely decorative. . . ." Like Bloomfield, she tries to get beyond the surface image to some deeper process, as if ambivalent about art "the instant a line / corrupts paper." Ironically, when she turns away from works of art and writes out of personal experience she becomes more artful and satisfying. Her villanelle and several sestinas are indifferent examples of those forms, but when she hits on a good subject and lets the emotion compel the

[6] BLACK DRUM, by *Enid Shomer*. University of Arkansas Press. $22.00; $14.00.

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writing, she can also achieve interesting formal effects. I thoroughly enjoyed the off-rhyming, unmetered couplets of "Cadillac," her opening portrait of an immigrant grandfather who made good. Another poem, "Elegy and Rant for My Father," has moments of fire:

> O heart like a serpent
> Knotted on itself! He was angry, he was ignorant
>
> and nothing—not good suits or manicures
> or flush nights or his wife's money—could secure
>
> his signature on a check. Bad mortgage risk,
> he was cursed and he cursed, his tongue a tusk
>
> that gored you and left you bleeding in public
> and still you covered for him. O heart like a hook!

These emotional energies force Shomer into a verbal alertness that is missing from her weaker poems. The most striking quality of her best work is honesty, as in "The Separation":

> The last thing of yours I touched was the leather
> jacket, for the serenity that marks all dead things
> from a saint's reliquary to the ashes
> of a fire. For years we flowed like water
> over each other. Your hands were silver
> as the starry edges of a door
> leaking dawn. Other parts were plum-
> colored, shaped to eat. All of you
> smelled alike. I opened myself
> without shame. We thrust our fingers and tongues
> everywhere, professors of salt
> and sweat, of the body's wet
> flowers. Who knows why we became a stiff pair
> of knees, when once we had been leaves rising
> to the slightest breath.

From the uncertain line break of its opening, this poem finds its way to a very good closing image. A few other poems like "Thistles" and "Hermit Crab" build with similar care and precision. In fact, I can imagine Shomer's dwelling as the crab's borrowed shell, a home that has had to do in a pinch, and the poet herself as "someone walking on sand."

Wherever Anne Stevenson eventually settles on Parnassus, we have in her *Collected Poems* the record of a mobile sensibility.[7] She even begins with a poem called "The Traveller" that I wish I could quote in full. Here is the concluding stanza:

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Unpacked and clean, I ordered tea
And waited for my company.
No one came. The room grew tall.
Outside the rain began to fall
While pieces of a yellow tree
Broke off and smashed like pottery.
I watched them drop, I ate, I rose,
I looked beneath my hair. I froze.
My ghosts were standing there in rows.

Are the smashed limbs from the traveller's sickened family tree? Plath and Sexton would have let us know, yet I would rather read Stevenson, a survivor who knows that poetry can be personal without being blatantly confessional. This book ends with a long family history in prose and verse letters, "Correspondences," and I confess I haven't got the full sense of it yet. Even its author concludes, "It is a poem I can't continue. / It is America I can't contain." But the rest of the volume is brimming with poems that draw me back—for their sanity as well as their range and depth.

Most American readers know Stevenson as the biographer of Sylvia Plath, not as the author of her own luminous poems. Stevenson's family history is transatlantic, and apparently she has known her share of troubles, but in her art she avoids self-absorption. She seems a compassionate feminist, wholly without the self-righteousness that is all-too-audible in her better-known contemporaries. Even as she admires Plath's ferocity, she asks, "Poor Sylvia, could you not have been / a little smaller than a queen— / a river, not a tidal wave / engulfing all you tried to save?" Stevenson is a river, I'd say, sustaining her readers in poems of variety and deftness. Here is a stanza from her wry commentary, "The Fiction-Makers":

Sanctified Pound, a knot
of nerves in his fist,
squeezing the Goddamned iamb
out of our verse,
making it new in his
archaeological plot—
to maintain 'the sublime'
in the factive? Couldn't be done.

Something went wrong
with 'new' in the Pisan pen;
he thought he was making now,
but he was making then.

[7] THE COLLECTED POEMS 1955-1995, by *Anne Stevenson.* Oxford University Press. $19.95p.

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She can also write "songs" that would stand with Thomas Hardy's—her "Willow Song" is a case in point—while other poems call to mind Auden or Stevie Smith. Elsewhere, asking to be saved from "snobbery and too damned much literary ambition," she confirms, for me, that she is a poet of genuine wisdom.

There are small failures in *The Collected Poems*, some pieces that never really get off the ground, others that don't rise above the occasion that prompted them. Weighed against so many fine poems, though, I don't think these failures matter. And at least one of her occasional poems, "Eros," can stand among her best:

I call for love
But, help me, who arrives?
This thug with broken nose
And squinty eyes.
'Eros, my bully boy,
Can this be you,
With boxer lips
And patchy wings askew?'

'Madam,' cries Eros,
'Know the brute you see
Is what long overuse
Has made of me.
My face that so offends you
Is the sum
Of blows by lust delivered
One by one.

We slaves who are immortal
Gloss your fate
And are the archetypes
That you create.
Better my battered visage,
Bruised but hot,
Than love dissolved in loss
Or left to rot.'

Somewhere in my overcrowded, imaginary Parnassus, J. V. Cunningham raises his glass. Perhaps he even envies Anne Stevenson's vitality and range.

Stand back from the anthill, and you will see that I have hardly begun to describe it. Lord knows what the tax man will say as he clambers upward from all the new houses. He might recall Anthony Burgess' belief that "life pays too much for art," and add that we rarely get what we pay for. Never mind. I like to think of good poets, living and dead, paying each other visits. Knocking on doors. Getting out of the cold.

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BRUCE BAWER

The Game of Taste

"LITERARY MERIT." "AESTHETIC VALUE." "TASTE." How do such terms fare at the end of the twentieth century? For some critics, they stand for essential concepts that remain as vital as ever; for others (who view taste as always classist, value as invariably subjective), they are utterly passé. Exemplary of the former sort of critic is Alfred Kazin, 82, whose first book appeared over half a century ago and the jacket copy of whose latest work, *God and the American Writer*,[1] describes him as "our greatest living critic"; exemplary of the latter sort is Janice Radway, an English professor who has recently written *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire*.[2] To examine these two writers' new books is to see in operation two drastically different conceptions of the critic's role.

Let's begin with Kazin, whose plucky first book, *On Native Grounds* (1942), a tendentious study of the period 1891-1941, set the stage for his career by depicting the literary landscape as a battleground between realists (the good guys) and others; its first chapter was entitled "The Opening Struggle for Realism," and the novelists treated at length were almost all realists or naturalists: Howells, Wharton, Dreiser, Anderson, Lewis, Cather, Glasgow, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Wright, Farrell, Steinbeck. *On Native Grounds* helped shape the American canon as we've known it since, and its successors followed much the same formula, each of them staking out a period, examining several writers in sequence, and reinforcing that first book's pro-realistic bias. *Bright Book of Life* (1971) commenced with Hemingway and surveyed a number of midcentury novelists, among them Vonnegut, Updike, Bellow, and Oates; *An American Procession* (1984) covered the century between 1830 and 1932, from Emerson through "the triumph of modernism," treating along the way Hawthorne, Poe, Henry Adams, Whitman, Lincoln, Melville, Dickinson, Twain, Henry James, Dreiser, Stephen Crane, T. S. Eliot, Pound, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Dos Passos.

All along, Kazin's critical approach has remained very much his own. Not only is he no academic theorist; he's not even a 1940s-style New Critic à la Cleanth Brooks and John Crowe Ransom. His method is impressionistic; he writes in an easy, accessible prose about authors and

[1] GOD AND THE AMERICAN WRITER, by *Alfred Kazin*. Alfred A. Knopf. $25.00.

[2] A FEELING FOR BOOKS: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire, by *Janice Radway*. University of North Carolina Press. $29.95.

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their works, showing how those works grew out of the authors' circumstances, placing them in social and historical context, and serving up firm opinions in profusion. If he celebrates the realistic depiction of people and situations, he tends to dislike, underrate, or ignore books that don't fall squarely into the realistic/naturalistic tradition. His major achievement has been to place that tradition at the center of the American canon, and to render extra-canonical books that some of us may consider superior to books he has canonized but that he finds too—what?—inward, grotesque, quirky, or precious. Consequently, such dreadful but "important" naturalistic works as Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* loom far larger in his pantheon than do the exquisite productions of writers like James Purdy and Guy Davenport. If Hemingway, for Kazin, still totally eclipses his contemporaries Glenway Wescott, Thornton Wilder, and William Maxwell, it's because Papa was that most admirable of all things, a "tough, sharp realist."

Now this number-one fan of realism and naturalism has written, of all things, a book called *God and the American Writer.* Why? Has Kazin, in old age, discovered himself to have a religious impulse? Is he responding to millennial America's upswing of interest in faith? Whatever the case, his title is provocative, and this reader, for one, found himself wondering what Kazin might have to say about such an imposing topic.

Alas, the answer is: not much. At least not much that seems fresh, urgent, or relevant. On the contrary, to be immersed in the major social, cultural, and political questions of the late 1990s and to turn from them to *God and the American Writer* is to feel a powerful and dismaying sense of its utter redundancy. For what Kazin has given us here is yet another good, old-fashioned Sunday-afternoon-after-church drive through the American literary countryside. The ride is agreeable enough, the scenery as attractive as ever. But is this relaxed excursion all that "our greatest living critic" has to offer us? Here again are Hawthorne and Emerson, Melville and Whitman, Lincoln and Dickinson, Twain and Eliot and Faulkner—and here again is Kazin retelling the stories of their lives and careers, and once more serving up familiar quotations and unsurprising observations. Who, one must ask, needs yet another plot summary of *The Scarlet Letter*? Or another walk through *Prufrock*? One hesitates to say it, but *God and the American Writer* is the sort of tired, gratuitous book that can almost make you understand why many smart graduate students today reject traditional approaches like Kazin's in favor of trendy critical theory.

To be sure, this book differs from its predecessors in that Kazin's emphasis here is on God. But it becomes clear very quickly that this subject matter simply doesn't suit him. Kazin's god has always been art; he has never really seemed to understand how religion works; when the subject has come up, he has often gotten cranky and written about it in the manner of someone who just doesn't get it and wishes the whole business would go away. He hasn't really changed. If this book has a principal theme, it is that literary genius and Christian orthodoxy don't

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go hand in hand. Almost every one of the chapters is a collection of quotations and biographical facts designed to show that the writer under examination was, indeed, heterodox. On Dickinson: "Other people had faith absolute. She had mind." Twain "was too obsessed with God to be consistent about Him." For each of his writers, Kazin is at pains to make clear, orthodox belief was not enough; each felt compelled to jettison absolutist dogma and ecclesiastical authority and find God on his or her own—or reject Him entirely.

Kazin makes this point, over and over, strenuously, emphatically, as if it were a revelation. Yet the observation is a commonplace. Almost every brilliant, original mind is unorthodox. This is true not only of the minds of novelists and poets, but of the minds of theologians. Such minds, moreover, tend to be unorthodox not only in religion but in other things, too. It is through the efforts of such minds that orthodoxies are reshaped, rearticulated, revitalized. Kazin seems not to understand this—or may not want to acknowledge it. In any case, he doesn't take his reflections on any writer here very far beyond the point of noting their heterodoxy. And how could he? The ultimate rationalist, he views all these writers' religious/spiritual/mystical lives from the outside. As a result, his rambling table talk doesn't bring us very close at all to the wellspring of their heterodoxies; for him, it is enough to say that they are heterodox, and to leave it at that, period.

The one theologically orthodox author treated here is T. S. Eliot, who, raised a Presbyterian in St. Louis, emigrated to Britain and found solace in Anglo-Catholicism. Kazin ridicules this pilgrimage. He seems constitutionally unable to comprehend the mystical appeal of Anglo-Catholicism for Eliot or to appreciate the meaning or value of Anglican ritual, which he mocks. And speaking of Catholicism, why isn't Flannery O'Connor here? She was at once a thoroughly orthodox Roman Catholic and the most extraordinary American short-story writer of the twentieth century. In *Bright Book of Life*, Kazin admitted that "she was one of the few Catholic writers of fiction in our day . . . who managed to fuse a thorough orthodoxy with the greatest possible independence and sophistication as an artist." Plainly challenged by this combination, Kazin made a few condescending remarks about O'Connor in that earlier book and then shuffled her offstage. It's hard not to conclude that she's totally absent from his new study mainly because her oeuvre alone blasts his thesis to smithereens.

Kazin's ultimate failing here is that he just can't imagine what it is like to believe in God—or, at least, in the Christian God. "Nobody argues about God today," he writes. (Well, maybe not on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.) He simply can't understand—is, indeed, perplexed by, angered by—a mind that can't let go of God, even if it has decided that God is evil. Quoting a passage from Twain's dark late work "The Mysterious Stranger" in which life is revealed to be a dream and God a monster with a diabolical master plan, Kazin recognizes the lingering influence of Twain's boyhood Calvinism, and asks, exasperatedly, "Yes,

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but who, by this confession, had this dream that God had a plan, a dreadful, insanely *total* plan for mankind but someone brought up like Mark Twain himself? Why blame God for becoming man's 'supreme fiction'?" So concludes Kazin's essay on Twain—for Kazin, having thus thrown up his hands uncomprehendingly at Twain's God-fixation, has nowhere to go, except on to the next writer.

What we see in the work of Alfred Kazin is literary criticism as it used to be widely practiced. It is criticism that takes for granted the value of a canon and the idea that there is indeed such a thing as a great book; it is criticism that arises out of an authentic response to a literary work by a thinking, feeling human being. For a prime example of a very different kind of criticism—one that has gained currency in the academy, and that seems poised to win the day in the next century, leaving the Kazins of the world on the ash heap of history—let us consider Janice Radway's *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire.*

Radway is, it might be said, the ultimate academic critic: she is a professor of English at the Mecca of academic criticism, Duke University. Many of us have long suspected that such critics don't really like literature and are blind and deaf to literary merit. The chief value of Radway's book lies in her frank admission that this is, for her, indeed the case. Radway is honest about the fact that her lower-middle-class origins (she grew up in suburban New Jersey) always made her feel—and *still* make her feel—intimidated by the academy and by high culture. She's honest about the fact that she sought a Ph.D. in English not because she loved literature but because a Ph.D. seemed to her a step up in social class. She's honest about the fact that, deep down, she loves the trash she grew up reading and really has little affection for the classics she's "supposed" to love, and that she feels like a class traitor for having spent so much time reading, explicating, teaching, and singing the praises of those "elitist" classics. And she's honest about the fact that she feels an uneasy twinge whenever someone speaks of literary quality, for she takes it as a putdown of her low origins and/or her taste for trash. Much of her book, indeed, amounts to little more than solipsistic self-therapy: "perhaps my interest in the Book-of-the-Month Club and in the nature of aesthetic value was a product of guilt: guilt at leaving *Reader's Digest, Woman's Day*, and the suburbs behind; guilt at the consequences of my own social mobility; guilt at the feelings of superiority I had worked so hard to achieve." (What, one wonders, would Mary McCarthy or Rebecca West have made of this neurotic handwringing?)

Radway's first book was *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, a sympathetic study of romance novels—yes, as in Harlequin romances—and of the women who read them. Seeking an equally congenial topic for her second book, she settled on a study of the Book-of-the-Month Club, in hopes that she would find among the BOMC judges an attractive populism. She arranged to spend several

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months in 1985 with the judges at the BOMC's Manhattan offices, interviewing them, sitting in on their meetings, and perusing their reports on new books. (Why she has taken so long to write about this experience goes unexplained.) Yet even the BOMC judges disappointed her, for they dared to speak seriously of literary merit, selecting some books because they exhibited such merit and dismissing others because they didn't. "Despite their appreciation for many different kinds of books, reading experiences, and pleasures," she complains, "the Book-of-the-Month Club editors resorted to drawing distinctions between good and bad books. They, too, it seemed, were caught up in the game of taste, in the business of discriminating between approved pleasures and those they considered more suspect or base."

Note well: Radway cannot imagine taste as anything but a game; for her, the kind of discrimination involved in judging books is barely distinguishable from the kind that also goes by the name of bigotry or racism; for her, aesthetic value is just another term for moral judgment and social elitism. The BOMC judges' "tendency to define the self by dismissing the tastes and preferences of others" (i.e., by rejecting junky books), Radway sniffs, "was disturbingly familiar to me." But of course what's disturbing is that a professor of English at a major university can have so little understanding of the concept of literary value.

At this book's heart lies a question: which is better, the academy's way of reading books or the BOMC's? In Part I, an account of her sojourn with the BOMC judges, Radway distinguishes between the two ways. "The club editors," she writes, "adopted a stance toward books and reading that was . . . distinctly different from the one with which I was most familiar. The editors quickly made it very clear that they were wary of academic ways of reading and writing, and that wariness was closely bound up with an articulate critique of academic habits of evaluation. It was also tied to their desire to assert against such academic strictures the validity of their own competing recommendations and professional expertise. 'Typically academic,' they disdainfully observed about many university press books—'too dry, too specialized, too self-absorbed for us.' In their world, the word 'academic' was as much a term of opprobrium as the word 'middlebrow' was in mine." (She writes as if all this came as a surprise to her—a mind-boggling thought.)

Radway suggests in Part I that the BOMC judges are less elitist than the academy. Yet in Part II, she undergoes a sea change. Having written Part I in an accessible tone and from the perspective of a self-reflective individual, she metamorphoses in Part II into a jargon-slinging academic robot who manages to find a way to make the BOMC inferior to the academy. Her great insight here is that the BOMC is in fact—aha!—a moneymaking scheme disguised as a cultural enterprise. "No longer either transcendent or pure, culture as it was marketed by middlebrow agencies like the Book-of-the-Month Club was sullied by the particular terms of its embodiment and therefore exposed as just one more material form penetrated by interest, by the economic." This is a

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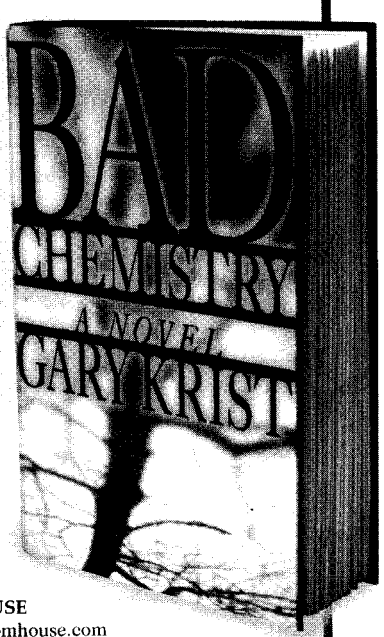

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complicated way of saying something very simple, and Radway says it over and over, in various pretentious ways. "If those book-lined shelves in the [BOMC's Manhattan] reception area and the character of the editorial meetings had lulled me into believing that I was studying an institution merely literary and cultural in nature," she writes, "the skepticism of the club's new executives reminded me starkly that the Book-of-the-Month Club was indeed a commercial establishment, and as such it had its own interests to protect. My questions, together with my plans to publish the answers I intended to develop, posed a potential threat, it seemed, not just to the professional expertise of the editors but also to the economic viability of the organization. Still, I needed to follow through on a project for which I had just received a major grant" (from the Guggenheim Foundation).

This is hilarious stuff—and what makes it all the richer is that the hilarity seems utterly unintentional. Who on earth would ever think that the BOMC was *not* a commercial operation? Radway writes with the colossal naïveté of someone who has gone straight through school without ever having to think or worry much about money—or, if she has, has never noticed it. She seems not even to notice the irony that her "major grant" makes her projected book—*this* book—a commercial operation as well; she doesn't even recognize that what she's saying here is that she, too, has her "own interests to protect."

And that's only the beginning of Radway's obtuseness. She seems not to realize that there is no real competition to speak of between books of the sort taken by the BOMC and specialized academic books. She writes about academic criticism as if she doesn't know how small an audience it has. She seems never to have given any thought to the paradox that she is an anti-elitist fan of mass culture who writes about it for an academic elite in language guaranteed to put off the ordinary reader. She says of the BOMC judges that "their reports [on new books] were much more personal than the style of writing I had been taught. At the same time, they conceptualized the books they wrote about not solely as occasions for extended analysis but, rather, as opportunities for experience and response." To this one can only say: *Duhhhhh!*

Has there ever been such a perfect product of the academic assembly line? Radway is constantly making reference to the way she has "been taught" to think, to read, to write. She knows nothing, one gathers, *except* what she has been taught by the academy. She has no understanding, no insight; all she has is the cant and categories she's been taught, and to the extent that she can shove what she's looking at into some prefabricated ideological pigeonhole, she feels she's accomplished her work as a scholar of contemporary culture. Never, it would appear, has a stray rebellious thought crossed her mind; never has she experienced—or, perhaps, allowed herself to acknowledge that she has experienced—frustration with the limitations of what she has been taught. Never has it occurred to her, apparently, to ask *how she feels* about something she has read in a professional capacity; never has it occurred to her to write

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about those feelings in her own words, instead of parroting the modish critics whose work she was spoon-fed by her own professors.

Yet her BOMC experience causes her to feel a twinge of rebellion, at last. She admits in the first part of the book that the BOMC judges "made me wonder what had happened to my capacity to read in this way"—that is, as a human being who loves books and not as an academic robot. This is a scandal—for the only way in which Radway differs from hundreds of her colleagues is not that she has lost her ability to read in this way but that *she admits it.* To move from Part I to Part II of her book is to suspect, for a moment, that Radway is consciously out to paint a picture of herself as a schizophrenic, a house divided against itself—an academic ideologue at war with a book-lover. Yet she doesn't have enough self-knowledge to be aware of the self-portrait she's painting. She is so accustomed to the rote exercise of applying theory to text that, having set up her BOMC experience in Part I, she just goes ahead and does what comes naturally in Part II, not realizing how totally at odds the exercise is with everything that has gone before. What's outrageous here, of course, is that it's people like Radway who are teaching the best and brightest young men and women today how to think, how to read, and how to write.

Kazin and Radway mark two ends of a spectrum. He clings heroically—quixotically?—to his canon; she rejects the very notions of taste and value on which that canon is based. The present critic's natural sympathies are with the old warrior, who—however much one may disagree with his specific judgments—has on his side intelligence, ardor, discipline, discrimination, seriousness. Yet one feels compelled to append the observation that a canon should be a living organism, constantly reshaping itself in accordance with changing circumstances and new insights; Kazin's canon feels a bit too much like a dead thing, something no longer reimagined but merely revisited, like a long-beloved summer resort that has seen better days. What is frustrating here, in any case, is that in the late 1990s what American culture needs is not just a tired recitation of canonical names but an active defense of the idea of literary value. In the face of the very real cultural threat personified by the likes of Janice Radway, in short, Kazin (like altogether too many other non-ideological critics, most of them younger than he is) seems overly content to be a well-mannered back number—a contemporary equivalent, ironically, of the nineteenth-century Genteel Tradition that his own more bracing realistic tradition supplanted. The ubiquity in the academy of critics like Radway suggests that if taste and value are to endure—let alone thrive—in the next century, gentility on the part of non-ideologues may not suffice.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

JOSEPH EPSTEIN's latest book is *Life Sentences*, a collection of literary essays published by W.W. Norton. He is the editor of *The Norton Book of Personal Essays*. . . . SUSAN BALÉE is currently working on an essay about Audubon, Whitman, and bird imagery in American poetry. . . . HAROLD FROMM is planning a new book based on his twenty-five years of environmental writing. . . . DANA GIOIA recently co-edited *Certain Solitudes: On the Poetry of Donald Justice* (University of Arkansas Press). . . . JOCEYLN BARTKEVICIUS* dreams of opening a nightclub, but meanwhile teaches creative writing at the University of Central Florida where she is nonfiction editor for *The Florida Review*. Current projects include a collection of essays, *Out of the Garden*, and a memoir on The Emerald Room. . . . GARY KRIST is the author of two story collections, *The Garden State* and *Bone by Bone*. His first novel, *Bad Chemistry*, has recently been published. . . . HAYDEN CARRUTH first published poems in *The Hudson Review* in 1957 and has been an Advisory Editor of the magazine since 1971. . . . EMILY GROSHOLZ's essay "Plato and Leibniz Against the Materialists" received the Selma V. Forkosch Prize for the best article published in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* in 1996. . . . JOHN HAINES's latest book is *At the End of This Summer: Poems 1948-54* (Copper Canyon Press). In August 1997 he was awarded an annual fellowship from the Academy of American Poets. He is presently living in Montana.

ANTHONY HECHT made his first appearance in *The Hudson Review* in our Spring 1949 issue. His most recent book is *Flight Among the Tombs*. He was a 1997 recipient of the Tanning Award, and has in preparation a new selection of poems entitled *The Gehenna Florilegium*. . . . MARK JARMAN's latest collection of poetry is *Questions for Ecclesiastes*. He is also co-editor of *Rebel Angels: 25 Poets of the New Formalism* and co-author of *The Reaper Essays*. His book of essays, *The Secret of Poetry*, is to be published in 1999. . . . MAXINE KUMIN's most recent books are *Selected Poems 1960-1990* and *Connecting the Dots*, both from Norton. She and her husband live on a farm in New Hampshire, where they raise horses and vegetables. . . . ROBERT McDOWELL, a contributor to *The Hudson Review* for more than twenty years, is the author of two books of poetry. His revised edition, *Poetry After Modernism*, has just been released by Story Line Press; his revised edition of *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry* is available from the University of Michigan Press. . . . DAVID MASON's book of essays, *The Poetry of Life and the Life of Poetry*, is forthcoming from Story Line Press. . . . LOUIS SIMPSON's *Modern Poets of France: A Bilingual Anthology* (Story Line Press) has received the 1998 Harold Morton Landon Translation Award from the Academy of American Poets. . . . CHARLES TOMLINSON's poems first appeared in *The*

**Asterisk indicates a new contributor.*

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Hudson Review in the Winter 1956-57 issue. In 1993 he received the Review's Bennett Award for his achievement in poetry. New Directions recently published his *Selected Poems*. . . . RICHARD HORNBY's most recent book is *Mad About Theatre* (New York, 1996), a collection of pieces written for *The Hudson Review*. He is Professor of Theatre at the University of California, Riverside.

JOHN LOUGHERY's biography *John Sloan: Painter and Rebel*, a finalist for the 1996 Pulitzer Prize in Biography, was recently published in paperback (Henry Holt/Owl Books). . . . KAREN WILKIN, author of *David Smith*, Abbeville Press, 1984, is currently organizing the exhibition "David Smith: Two into Three Dimensions" for the American Federation of Arts. . . . BERT CARDULLO is the co-editor of two books recently published: *Playing to the Camera: Film Actors Discuss Their Craft* (Yale) and *The Theater of Fernand Crommelynck: Eight Plays* (Susquehanna University Press). He continues as Associate Professor of Drama at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. . . . JOSIAH FISK reviewed classical music for the Boston *Herald* from 1985 to 1995. He edited the new edition of the anthology *Composers on Music* (Northeastern University Press). . . . ROBERT S. CLARK has written music criticism for *The Hudson Review* since 1973. . . . During fall 1997 MARCIA B. SIEGEL gave three lectures on World Dance/Contemporary Stagings in the Dance and Drama Department at Hofstra University. . . . WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD's *Talking Back to Emily Dickinson and Other Essays* is forthcoming from the University of Massachusetts Press this summer. . . . The Free Press has just brought out THOMAS M. DISCH's cultural history of science fiction, *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World*. . . . DEAN FLOWER's first fiction chronicle in *The Hudson Review* was published twenty-two years ago. . . . R.S. GWYNN's anthologies of poetry and fiction have just appeared as part of the Longman Pocket Anthology series. He is University Professor of English at Lamar University. . . . BRUCE BAWER's book *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity* was named one of the best books of 1997 by both *Publishers Weekly* and *Booklist*.

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IN THIS ISSUE:

The *planetarkhis*, the modern Greek word for ruler of the planet, the President of the United States may be, but we can all be assured that, whoever he is, nowadays he is almost certainly likely to be a mediocrity. "Besides," [Lord] Bryce wrote, "the ordinary American voter does not object to mediocrity. He has a lower conception of the qualities requisite to make a statesman than those who direct public opinion in Europe have. He likes his candidate to be sensible, vigorous, and, above all, what he calls 'magnetic,' and does not value, because he sees no need for, originality or profundity, a fine culture or a wide knowledge." Mr. Ford, Mr. Carter, Mr. Reagan, Mr. Bush, Mr. Clinton—take a bow, please.

—Joseph Epstein, "George Washington, An Amateur's View," p. 21.

It was at that precise ecstatic moment I experienced my ecological epiphany. Though it didn't come from God, John Muir's Sierran hosannas to what he called divinity and what Shelley more aptly called "the intense inane" were never far from my mind. It derived, rather transparently, from easily identifiable components of some of the most major intuitions and experiences of my reflective life, but now, like the treescape's sun-illuminated relief, my ordinary horizontal thinking had been shot through by a vertical bolt of lightning-insight, casting the mundane into the sublime by making it possible to think a host of thoughts simultaneously.

And exactly what did the mountains have to say?

Put somewhat baldly: "Everything human is technology!"

—Harold Fromm, "Ecology and Ecstasy on Interstate 80," p. 65.

The Emerald Room was a film noir set, Kirdy the hero. He moved quickly through darkened rooms in a black suit, smoking cigarettes, downing Scotches. He was Rick in *Casablanca*, Saturday night was the rise of the stage, the blare of the horns, the beat of the drum, cigarette smoke, a woman disrobing, an M.C. telling jokes, couples dancing, the clink of glasses, the family table in the dining room, moon over Long Island Sound as we drove off for breakfast at the Duchess Diner.

—Jocelyn Bartkevicius, "Hat Check Noir," p. 98.

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